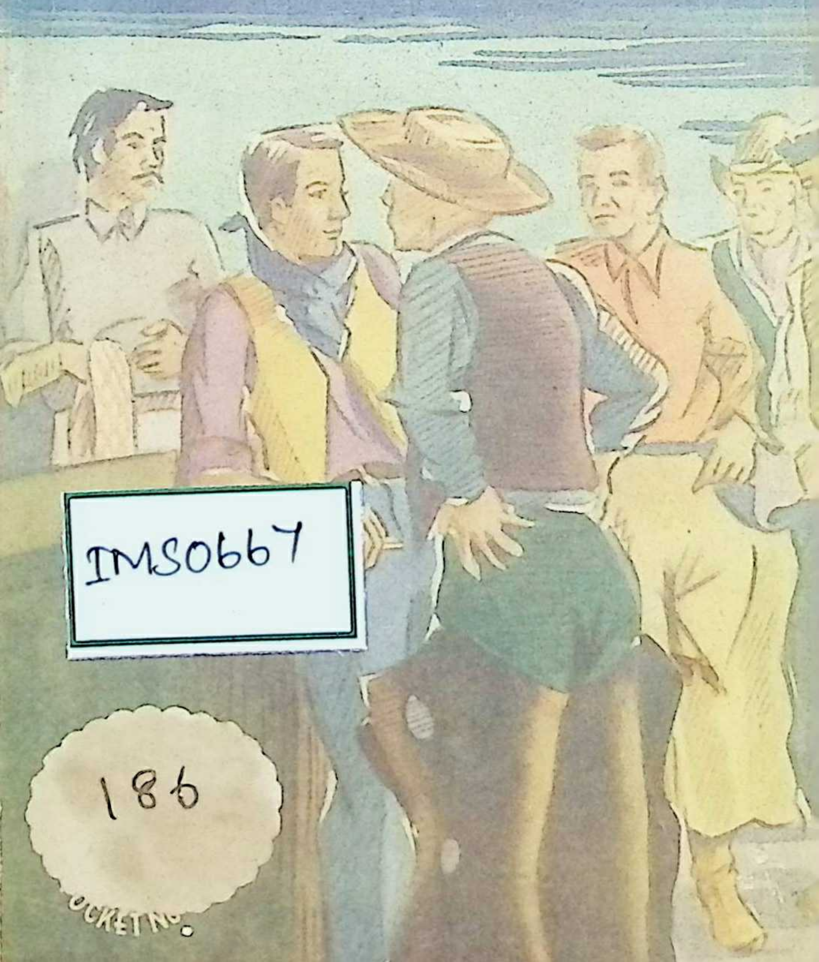
WANDERING COWBOY

CHARLES WESLEY SANDERS



Adventure in the West

"THE MAN ain't happy 'less he's straightenin' somethin' out." This was said of Mournful Martin, a wandering cowboy who moved from ranch to ranch, willing to work for anyone who would hire him. It proved to be true when he helped young George Winfield. Two newcomers had purchased ranches adjacent to Winfield; one owner, Staves by name, was a fine fellow when he was sober, but a terror when he was drunk—and Winfield feared gun play. The other newcomer, Partch, was a mystery, and Mournful Martin set out to investigate both camps. If Winfield only feared gun play, Mournful Martin most certainly found it. This thrilling yarn one is of Sanders' best.

PRICE IN INDIA
FOURTEEN ANNAS



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CHARLES WESLEY SANDERS



WILD WEST CLUB

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CHAPTER I

CHANGING RANGE

YOUNG GEORGE WINFIELD presented a troubled face as he approached old Danforth and Mournful Martin. Danforth was out in the healing Arizona sun, and Mournful was lounging near him, because Mournful thought he might as well be out in the sun as elsewhere. He had nothing to do. At least he had believed, when he had risen that morning, that he had nothing to do. From the look on George's face he decided, now, that something might be stirring presently. Everything had been just lovely on the Winfield ranch for a month.

Mournful and Danforth were visiting the Winfields, due to the older man's having had a severe illness in his Oregon home. His doctor had recommended Arizona's thin air and sunshine. In George's father, both Mournful and Danforth had met an old friend. He had been murdered and Mournful had brought his slayer to book. George had married Emily Devers, and his sister, Ruth, had married Colonel Parkes, stationed at a nearby fort. That was a past story now. Emily Winfield was, of course, here now, and Ruth was over at the fort.

"George seems to have somep'n on his mind," Mournful said in an undertone.

"I don't doubt it," Danforth retorted. "Wherever you are, a jam is bound to be brewin'. I never seen such a man for havin' things happen all around him."

"Me, I ain't responsible for nothin'," Mournful stated. "I lead a lone an' sad life. It's other hombres that starts things."

"An' I expect you want me to say you finish 'em," said Danforth. "Well, consider it said."

"It's awful good of you to be so kind," Mournful said. "I dunno how I'd git along if you didn't gimme a word o' praise now an' then."

George arrived. He was rolling a blade of dry grass in his mouth. There was a furrow between his eyes and those eyes were dark from an impatience which could readily become anger. He leaned back against the wall of the house alongside Mournful.

"I b'l'eve we're gonna get a good rain," he said. "It's overdue. I hope there won't be no cloudbursts in the hills. We might have a flood. We had a fire las' summer an' them hills is bare for half a mile. Water could back up behind a lotta truck that'd be washed down an' when the truck give way, there'd be a roll o' that water out on the flat."

Yeh, Mournful told himself, somethin' was brewin'. George was speakin' jest like a man'd speak when he knowed somethin' was brewin'. Well, all a lone fella could do was to wait till George saw fit to come to the point.

George stared back at the hills for a while as if his sole concern was with them. It was as if he could see water rolling down in the canyons, soon to flood the flat. At last he spat out the blade of grass. Mournful did not make the mistake of straightening up. That might be an interruption. Danforth sat very still in his chair, his eyes on the ground.

"Damn it," George said at last, "I don't see why things couldn't of stayed like they was."

"Things," Mournful observed, "never stays like they are. There's allus change. It's the one fac' you c'n bank on."

"I might as well go up against Staves now as later," George said. "If I can catch him when he's sober, maybe I can reason with him."

"Oh, there ain't no question about that," Mournful declared. "You get hold o' Staves when he ain't been drinkin' an' you can just wind him about your little finger."

"Why, do you know him?" George asked.

"Never even heard tell o' the fella."

"This ain't no jokin' matter, Mournful," George said, a little stiffly.

"Who said it was?"

"If you don't know Staves, you were jokin' in what you said about him."

"Not me! I jest grabbed holt o' the one little thing you held out. You wasn't none too plain, y'know."

Danforth raised his head and turned in his seat and looked up at George.

"Son," he said, "you can't go looking for trouble. You ain't been married a month. You got a fine wife. Your job from now on is to look after her. You better explain to Mournful what you got on your mind."

" Mournful did so much when my father was killed. . . ."

" The man ain't happy 'less he's straightenin' somethin' out," Danforth pursued. " It's the on'y thing he does well. Oh, course, he's the best roper, rider, gunman in the world, but them things is on'y aids in his gen'ral scheme o' life. Tell him ! "

" I aim to do my share. Oh, well, mebbe there won't be no trouble. It's on'y that when Staves gets a few drinks inside him, he's the most onery hombre that ever forked a horse."

" Other times ? " Mournful asked.

" As decent an' pleasant a man as you'd want to meet."

" The best thing to do would be to make him swear off drinkin'," said Mournful.

" You see how far I'm gettin' with Martin, don't you, Mr. Danforth ? " George said.

" Ever'thing's as clear as a black night to me," Mournful pointed out.

" Oh ! Well, it's like this. You know where the old Porter ranch is, Mr. Danforth. It——"

" I know, too," said Mournful.

" Bear with him, George," Danforth advised.

" I reckon I'll have to. Well, Staves has bought the Porter ranch. Staves is a good business man, like his father was before him. He makes money. I hear he was able to pretty near pay cash for the Porter place."

" An' that means that your cows an' his will graze together," said Mournful.

" That's the hell of it. Staves will get drunk some day an' then he'll come ridin' over here. He'll find somethin' to pick a quarrel about. That'll mean gun play."

" How is the gent with a shootin' iron ? " Mournful asked.

" Fast."

" That don't mean nothin'. How fast ? "

" Fastest man in his own country to the north," George said. " Men ride around him."

" An' that," Mournful shrewdly said, " is why he goes around pickin' fights. It'd be good medicine for him to meet a man that could make a few fancy draws for his benefit."

" Meanin' Mournful Martin ? "

" Why, I wouldn't mind takin' on the job if nobody else is handy. What-for kind of a ranch is this Porter place ? "

" Thought you knew about it."

"I did, quite a few years ago."

"It's been kep' up."

"Good ranch, then."

"There's somethin' more," George went on. "The Schofield ranch has been sold, too."

"I know that place," Mournful said. "It been kept up?"

"Naw. It's been allowed to go to pieces. On'y a few cows over there now. Buildin's will go acrost the flat in the first big wind."

"Who's the gent that has gobbled that property?"

"I hear his name is Partch. That's all I know about him. Don't even know if he's young or old."

"How old is Staves?"

"Oh, thirty, mebbe."

"Jest a young squirt."

Mournful left the wall of the house and squatted. With his forefinger he drew a line as if to the northeast and then a line as if to the northwest. At the top of each line he made a dot. He made a third dot where the two lines began.

He pointed first to the lower dot, and said: "Winfield's." To the right-hand dot: "Partch's." To the left-hand dot: "Staves's." Then he swept his hand over the area between the lines and beyond the upper dots. "Cows o' all three in here an' beyond," he concluded. "Round-ups together. Men o' three outfits workin' together in bad weather. An' one o' the owners gits drunk and flashes his gun. The second owner we don't know nothin' about. The third owner is George Winfield. . . . Well, I think I'll jest th'ow a saddle on a good horse an' take a ride."

"I can't let you shoulder this business, Mournful," George protested. "My family has always been on good terms with the Porters an' the Schofields. All of a sudden I find I got new men to deal with. I oughta find out about 'em myself."

"I," said Mournful, "am a better finder-out than you are. Jest lemme ride around a while. My good gosh, I ain't been on a horse enough in the las' month to keep me from gittin' saddle weary in my first mile now, but I'll do the best I c'n do. I'll be back mebbe tomorrow—least soon."

"Let him go, George," Danforth rather ordered, out of habit. "Clean the frown off'n your face an' go in an' say howdy to your wife. You ain't seen her in an hour."

George remained where he was till he saw Mournful ride across the flat to the north. Then he turned toward the house, and his face was bright enough, as it always was when he was about to see Emily.

"Mournful will be gone for a couple days," Danforth said.

"Why so long ?"

"Staves has jest finished a deal. He'll be feelin' his oats. If he gets drunk now an' then, he'll ride into town to take on a load o' liquor, big or little. Mournful will know that."

"Mournful's wise, ain't he, Mr. Danforth ?"

"You can depend on Mournful Martin," said Danforth, "an' I dunno that I could say more about any man."

George went into the house and Danforth continued to sit in the sun.

Mournful had worked in this Arizona country before he had gone north to Oregon, there to cease his wanderings when he had entered Danforth's employ ; and to Danforth he had become more than a cowhand. He had become friend and companion.

So he knew just where to ride to reach the old Schofield ranch, now the Partch ranch. It was the middle of the afternoon when he rode in. Nobody was about, and he did not hail the house. He sat his horse, looking about.

Recollection of these buildings came to him, but they were mere ghosts of what they had been in his day here. The buildings were weather-stained and if the foundations of the house were not repaired, the house would soon lie down to take a long nap.

Everything, however, might be all right now, Mournful knew ; for the new owner might have capital to bring the place back to what it had once been. Mournful knew that there was a well behind the house, and he thought he might as well give his horse a drink. That would be a sufficient explanation for his having ridden in and would give him a little more time.

When he returned from the well, he found a man standing in the doorway of the house. He was rolling a cigarette, and Mournful believed he was doing that so that he might temporarily keep his eyes down.

Mournful took an immediate dislike to him. He was dirty, for one thing. His face and hands looked as if they had not been scrubbed in a long time. Mournful noticed that the hands were well-shaped, though. The right-hand could probably handle a gun.

The man was bareheaded and his shock of hair surprised Mournful. Though the hair, like the face and the hands, was dirty, the sunlight struck glints from it. If it had been even halfway clean the sunlight would have made it shine, Mournful was sure ; and it curled over the man's head.

The cigarette finished, the man looked up and pushed the cigarette into his mouth. Mournful saw that his face was seamed and that he was older than he had at first appeared. However, his eyes were big and they flashed.

"Howdy, cowboy," he said, as he produced a card of matches and lighted the cigarette.

The carelessness did not deceive Mournful. It meant dismissal. There was now a cold aloofness about the man. He took Mournful to be a passing puncher and wanted him to pass on. That was plain enough.

So Mournful rode on. He had no doubt that the man was Partch. And he was dangerous ! He seemed to be alone. Still he had not detained a visitor for a word or two. He wanted to remain alone ! He might be a cowman ; he might be something else.

That sufficed for the time being. Mournful went on to Staves's. A different scene presented itself there. Staves and two or three punchers were going about the place as busy as bees. Mournful sat his horse till Staves found a moment.

"Howdy," he said, with the utmost cordiality.

Mournful saw that he was perfectly sober, and Mournful would not have wanted to meet a man more likeable. He had his share of good looks and what drinking he had done had not fattened him. He was lean and hard.

"Light, stranger," he said. "Supper's comin' up."

That was entirely regular, as distinguished from the irregularity of Partch's. Mournful dismounted, fed his horse, washed his hands and face and squatted by the bunk house.

Presently some forty riders came in. Mournful, entirely at home with them, ate with them and smoked with them afterwards. Naturally he was not questioned.

Staves came out of the house as the sun was sinking. An oldish man followed him. Staves talked to him rapidly, apparently continuing a conversation begun in the house.

"I'll be back tomorrow, I guess," he finished, and started for a corral, where, Mournful now saw, a horse awaited him.

Mournful rose and walked down to the corral. His

horse was outside it. Out of habit, Staves was feeling the cinches. He was about to mount when he caught sight of Mournful.

"Leavin' us, cowboy?" he asked. "Welcome to stay the night."

Mournful saw that Staves was a good man whom whisky might wreck. It might undermine his health or lead him into a jam from which he would not escape with his life.

"Goin' on to town," Mournful said, and his little smile almost came to his lips.

He knew that Staves was going to town. Therefore he could ride with Staves, talk to him some on the way, observe him take his first drinks, find out how much was required to rouse his evil emotions.

"Goin' to town myself," Staves said. "Ride with you."

Damn it, Mournful told himself, Staves was a good guy. He might have said, being a cowman: "You can ride with me," but he wasn't that kind.

When they went into the road, Mournful expected that Staves would at least lope his horse, but he was content to walk it. He seemed to be in no great hurry to get to a saloon.

"I just moved in here," Staves said. "Course, I want some information."

That was regular, too. Staves asked no questions. He just gave Mournful a chance to talk if Mournful wished to do so. Mournful told him how he came to be in the country. He explained in detail about the Winfield ranch.

"So I'll be workin' cows with Winfield," Staves said. "Glad he's a good cowman. I can't stand a man that's slack."

"You got a neighbour that looks an' ac's as if he was slack enough," Mournful said.

"Who's he?"

"I don't gen'ally tell tales, but the situation kinda lines itself up peculiar," Mournful proceeded. "This here George Winfield has been married recent, an' o' course he's got responsibilities that he didn't have a while back. Besides, he lost his father a month or so ago. He's young an' he's a little bit awkward about his job. He'll take hold fast, though.

"Well, your neighbour is a newcomer here like yourself. He looks to me like he might not be no cowman or mebbe a cowman gone wrong."

"Tough?"

"Tough enough."

"I'll have a look at him when I get back," Staves said. "He better not start nothin'."

"There wasn't nobody around his house when I was there an' he pract'ly tol' me to be on my way." Mournful continued. "'Course, I rode outa there. I didn't want no trouble with him."

"If he's the kind o' fella you think he is, he oughta be handled fast," Staves declared. "But don't trouble yourself about him. When you get back to Winfield's, just tell Winfield that the fella bein' closest to me is for me to handle."

"Yeh, I'll do that," Mournful said. "He looks to me like he might be fast with a gun."

Staves turned in his saddle to look at Mournful. Mournful was looking between his horse's ears. Staves seemed about to say something but changed his mind. Mournful could easily guess what he had been about to say—that he was fast with a gun himself.

Staves struck his horse into a lope, walked him, loped him again. Mournful was not watching him; he was *feeling* him. He felt a change come over Staves. The town was nearing. Lights. Saloons. Dancing girls. Gambling tables. Thoughts of these were stirring Staves's blood.

"Let's hit it," he said to Mournful, and now Mournful felt a rising fever in him.

They arrived in town within an hour. Staves did not stop at the first saloon. He rode along till he came to what seemed the biggest one. Then he sent his horse up to the hitch rack and flung himself down. He seemed not to notice that Mournful tied his horse sooner than he did.

Staves started for the door and Mournful went along with him, though Staves scarcely seemed aware of his presence.

CHAPTER II

Changed Man

Staves took a moment to look over the room which he and Mournful entered. It differed hardly at all from many other rooms in the cow country. The hour was so early that the occupants of the room had hardly come alive for the nightly carousal. The music had not yet started, so that there was no dancing. A game of poker was in progress and the roulette wheel was being played by a couple of punchers. A dozen men or so were at the bar.

Satisfied with his survey, Staves went immediately to the bar. He seemed to forget Mournful and then to remember him. Mournful was slowly walking down the room. Staves could not call to him without raising his voice, and he seemed to think that not worth while. If Mournful didn't want a drink, that was his business.

Staves ordered whisky. Mournful was about to take up a position from which he could watch the man, but his attention was attracted to a youngster who was the last man in the line. Something familiar about him struck Mournful, but he could not place him. Mournful could not have known him in other days in this country, for he was too young. He was sure that he had not met him since his arrival.

The youngster took a drink of whisky, set down his glass, and removed his hat, not to scratch his head, but to smooth back his luxuriant shock of bright hair. Mournful knew him then. He was either the son or the young brother of Partch. Mournful found he had the same build, the same shapely hands; and he had hair such as Partch must have had in his youth. And whereas Partch was careless of his person, the youngster seemed to take pride in his appearance. His clothing was clean. He was shaved and his hands looked as if they had been scrubbed.

Mournful wanted to get a better look at him and possibly a word with him. There was room at the bar beyond him and Mournful stepped up and ordered a drink. As he spoke the youth turned toward him and Mournful found that his eyes were very clear. Certainly he had not been drinking to excess and probably never did so.

As Mournful took his drink the fiddles began to give forth what passed for music, and the youth turned eagerly away from the bar. He found a girl and began to dance with her. Mournful turned his back to the bar and watched. Young Partch was a good dancer and as he came closer to Mournful on the floor Mournful found his face aglow.

A healthy kind of a fella, Mournful declared. Didn't git drunk. Could prob'ly dance all night. Then would get his horse an' hit it for home.

Mournful thought of the insolent, dirty, disagreeable man whom he had met at the Partch ranch. Those two were kin, so much so that they looked alike, but they were not kin otherwise. This youngster still found some fun in living ; Mournful was sure the older Partch found none.

Mournful took no snap judgment, for he had a growing feeling that he and the Partches and Staves were going somehow to mix sooner or later., Also he had found it unwise to make up his mind about any man in too great a hurry. There was no way of telling what the older Partch had been through. Some time in the past he might have found life as sweet as this youngster still found it.

Since the youngster continued to dance, Mournful walked back to a spot from which he could observe Staves. Staves was swallowing a drink, and Mournful guessed that he had swallowed a number during Mournful's brief absence.

Staves set down his glass with great deliberation. Mournful needed no further hint that he was going to turn away from the bar. He was very likely primed now to take an interest in what was going on. Whether he was in a quarrelsome mood already Mournful could not, of course, guess.

Staves's eyes, very brilliant now, roved the room. Mournful did not think then, that he was looking for a fight. He was, however, different from the man who had entered the room a while ago. His mouth was so tightly held that the lips were folded inward. A flush had come into his cheeks, bringing out more strongly his rather prominent cheekbones.

He appeared to find nothing of special interest, at least to himself, and he started to turn back to the bar. As he went around, his eyes found Mournful, and he stopped, fronting the long man.

With a backward jerk of his head he commanded

Mournful to come up to the bar. Mournful had seen men act in all kinds of ways. He had heard them brag. He had seen them become bossy, as Staves had become now. And of all the acts of men he liked such an act as Staves was committing now less than most. Mournful had helped many a man, many a girl, many a woman ; but he had never yet permitted anyone to tell him where he headed in.

So he merely stood still, not even refusing to do what Staves was ordering him to do. Staves was starting something. Let him finish it ! Mournful was ready. He was reputed to be fast with a gun. Let him try his draw against old Mournful Martin's.

Again Staves jerked back his head. Mournful remained where he was. And then Mournful saw that the liquor which Staves had poured into him had somewhat confused him. He seemed not to remember that he was not in his own country, where ordinary men were doubtless afraid of him because of his reputation. Also, Mournful recalled, Staves must have mistaken him for a meek man, because of what Mournful had said about Partch. In any event there was a look of astonishment in Staves's now too brilliant eyes.

" Come up here and have a drink," Staves said in a voice which just carried to Mournful.

As he ceased speaking, however, the fiddles stopped playing and the dancers started for the bar. Seeing two men confronting each other as Mournful and Staves were, they stopped. The girls cautiously withdrew to a far corner of the room, and most of the men to one side.

Though Mournful could not see him, one man refused to withdraw. That was young Partch. Pulling his hat a little lower over his eyes to shield the eyes from the lights, he stood in the middle of the floor, as still as Mournful was.

The men at the bar had, of course, heard Staves's order. They moved along till they were a group at the end of the bar, out of the line of fire of each gun, should there be firing.

For a space Staves stood staring at Mournful. Mournful knew that he was going for his gun. He was lost to everything except the one fact that this homely long man would not do as he was told. Mournful's hand was loose at his side. He held it the same distance from his gun butt as Staves held his hand.

Then Staves suddenly laughed. In his turn Mournful

was astonished. Passion had begun to burn in Staves's eyes, but now they were cooler. He explained his mirth when he said: "You're one hell of a lookin' fella. You don't know who I am, do you?"

Mournful was aware that Staves would not have spoken those words if he had been sober. Mournful admitted to himself that he was no handsome young cowboy as he stood there, but that had nothing to do with the case. Staves had ordered him up to the bar and he was standing precisely where he had been when that order was first given.

That was the thing, by Gawd!

For once Mournful was explosive. This fella Staves wasn't fast with a gun. He only thought he was. If he had really been fast, he would have had Mournful dancing a jig by now. Probably accidentally, he got a reputation where he had come from and the reputation had endured.

Before Mournful Martin got through he would bust that reputation. On that he was determined. It was important. Staves, a drunkard on occasion, must not be allowed to get a false reputation here. That would spell trouble from time to time.

Staves's mirth passed as swiftly as it had come. Anger clutched him fully.

He went for his gun.

Mournful's gun was on him fully before he got his own gun out of the holster. In fact Mournful had time to extend his gun hand a little. Staves removed his hand from the gun butt and stupidly leaned forward, his face screwed up as if he were making an effort to assure himself that his eyes had not deceived him.

There were steps behind Mournful. He darted one look around and saw that young Partch was advancing. However, Mournful saw that he had no need to watch Partch. His eyes were wholly on Staves and his lips were parted in a derisive smile.

He stopped a little behind Mournful.

"Whyn't you finish it?" he asked Staves.

Staves slowly turned his head so that he could regard Partch. He was, Mournful saw, sobered. Mournful returned his gun to its holster, but his eyes did not leave Staves.

And then he broke his silence. He went further. He uttered a threat. "Don't draw on the boy, Staves. If you do, I'll drill you through."

"What's your name, fella?" Staves asked the youngster.

"You've got so you're askin' questions, huh?"

"I on'y wanta know who you are."

"Well, find out!"

"Son, get back on the dancin' floor," Mournful said. "That's the place for you right this minute."

"I can stay where I am if I wanta."

Mournful was fully back to normal. Staves was in no position to draw on him now, and he was convinced that he would not draw on young Partch.

"Partch, do what I tell you," Mournful said. "The little breeze has blowed itself out for the time bein'."

"How did you know my name?" the youngster asked. "I ain't never been in this place before."

"Oh, I pick up infermation as I go along," Mournful retorted. "Do what I tell you. You got nice bright hair. The dancin' girl'll miss you."

"You tryin' to make fun o' me?" Partch asked wrathfully.

"I don't never *try* to do nothin'. I jest do it."

"You think you're quite a fella, don't you?"

"Well, what do you think 'bout that?"

"Oh, hell, mebbe you are!"

And young Partch turned and walked out on the floor. Thinking the little breeze had indeed blown itself out, the fiddlers began to scrape. But no one went up on the floor. Young Partch stood there alone. Slowly Staves turned back to the bar. Mournful still remained where he was. Staves ordered whisky.

Mournful saw that he was watching him in the mirror.

Well, Mournful Martin wasn't going to stand out there all night. He guessed it was time for him to take the initiative. Staves's back was still to him and he walked up to the bar, placing himself on Staves's right, so that any movement Staves made toward his gun could at once be discerned.

"Liquor," Mournful said to the bartender.

Mournful poured himself a drink, though he was ready to meet any move that Staves might make. He heard the door opened and looked into the glass. His eyes fell on a man as old as Danforth. The man started to pass both Mournful and Staves, and then his eyes fell on Mournful. He stopped dead in his tracks.

"Well, I'll be damned," he said. "By all the gawds, Mournful Martin!"

"Better keep back, Mr. Long," Mournful said, for he had recognized the man from years gone by, once having worked for him.

Long glanced at Staves, then nodded: "Up to your old tricks are you, Mournful?"

"Well, some mebbe."

"I dunno who you are, fella," Long addressed Staves, "but I'm tellin' you you're up against the best damn man with a gun that ever hit this or any other country. If I was you, I'd jus' back out."

Long went up to the bar some distance from the two men and ordered a drink. He was too old a hand to duck a possible shooting, or perhaps he depended upon Mournful.

Staves poured another drink and downed it. Then he turned his head and his eyes met Mournful's. Mournful's slight smile was on his lips.

"Mournful Martin, huh?" he asked. "Who the hell is Mournful Martin?"

"Staves, I'm jest a puncher," Mournful said. "I ain't lookin' fer no trouble with you. I'll tell you, though, that I come lookin' for you."

"You come to my house an' lemme feed you while you was gunnin' for me, huh?"

"I didn't! If I had been gunnin' for you, I wouldn't have gone to your house. I wanted to make friends with you. I tol' you young Winfield had jest been married. Your repertation come along ahead of you—a good fella when you're sober, a perfec' devil when you're drunk."

"Who tol' you that?"

"Oh, I jest heard it. Things like that travels, y' know."

"You ain't no faster with a gun than I am."

"Have it your own way," Mournful said coldly. "I've tried to make peace with you, so that you an' Winfield could git along together. If you don't want peace, you shore can have the other thing."

"I'll decide what I'll have."

"I know you will! Well, I'm steppin' along to speak to Mr. Long for a minute. He's a big man in these parts. It'd be well for you to meet him. You may need his help some day."

"I don't need nobody's help."

"That kind of a man don't live."

Mournful saw that Staves's drinks had soured him. He had been humiliated when he had expected to shine. Mournful therefore began to think that there was no cure

for the man. So long as he drank, he would want to make somebody dance to his tune, and it looked as if he would not give up liquor.

"You won't meet Long in a friendly way?" Mournful asked.

"All I want from Long is for him—an' you—to leave me alone!"

"I'll be glad to leave you alone, long as you keep your gun where it belongs."

Fury flamed in Staves at that. Damn it, he was a cowman. This homely fella was on'y a puncher. He'd never been anything but a puncher. He shore had his nerve to go up against a cowman. The one thing Staves overlooked was that Mournful didn't give a continental whom he went up against.

"You better not try any more gun play here," Mournful said. "You might shoot me but you'd be hung higher'n a kite. Long could tell any puncher in the place what to do. I'm leavin' you."

Staves could not control his fury. He came around, aiming his left fist at Mournful's face. He was not so tall as Mournful—few men were—but he was stockier and younger, and there was force behind the swinging blow. Mournful slipped back along the bar and Staves went clear around. He found himself face to face with young Partch. Partch, younger than Staves, heavier, took hold of both Staves's arms. He held him as if Staves had been a young boy.

Staves cursed him furiously and ordered him to remove his hands. Partch only grinned.

"Take your hands off'n him," Mournful said. "Him an' me can settle our own differences."

"I heard what that ol' fella said," Partch returned. "You're some kind of a famous gunman. That don't scare me none. I'll take my hands off'n this hombre when I get good an' ready."

Mournful smashed the youngster on the point of the jaw. He sank to the floor with a ludicrous expression on his face. Mournful had struck the blow because he was beginning to believe that the youngster was not so genuine as he seemed. Anyhow he butted in too much.

Then as Mournful drew back Staves went for his gun again. He seemed unable to stand more without retaliating.

After he had struck Partch, Mournful had immediately

turned his head so that he might watch Staves. Therefore he saw Staves go for his gun. He threw himself forward and collided with Staves. Staves fell back and his hold on his gun was momentarily loosened. Mournful seized his wrist and tried to draw his hand away from the gun, but Staves's grip tightened. The gun came out. Mournful wrapped a long arm about Staves's neck and drew the man's body up to his own. The gun was now down, between the two bodies, with Mournful's hold on the wrist tighter.

"Lemme go, you damn coward!" Staves screamed so loudly that everyone in the place could hear. "I'll blow your black heart out."

As Mournful held on, he saw two punchers almost glide up behind Staves. He knew why they had come. Long, powerful old cowman, had sent them. They stuck guns into Staves's back.

"You get two bullets in just about two seconds 'less you drop that gun, hombre," one said icily.

Staves, seeming to come to his senses a little, dropped the gun. Mournful pushed the man away from him, but not so far but that Staves was within reach of a blow. Mournful knew that he could deliver a beauty, but he forbore. With young Partch lying on the floor still and Staves pushed back, menaced, almost anything might result from this situation later on.

One of the punchers removed Partch's gun and called for water and dashed it into the youngster's face. The vitality of youth asserted itself and Partch opened his eyes. He got rather dizzily to his feet and dropped his hand to where his gun should have been.

"Who's got my gun?" he whispered. "Give it to me. I'll take care o' myself."

"You better shut your mouth," one of the punchers retorted "or it'll be shut for you."

"Who the hell are you?" Partch demanded.

"A fella that knows enough to mind his own business."

Long came up slowly and stood looking at the group for a moment out of eyes glowing with derision.

"They's a back room here," he then said. "We'll go into it an' find out what the line-up is."

CHAPTER III

ORDERS

"I WON'T GO," Staves declared.

"Nor me," said Partch.

Long smiled. He seemed to be getting a good deal of amusement out of the situation. That was, perhaps, partly due to his meeting Mournful Martin again. Mournful had been younger when he had known him before, but he remembered what a squareshooter the long man had been even then and how skilful he had been in all the arts of the range. The intervening years appeared not to have dulled Mournful even slightly. Long did not have to ask whether he was on the wrong side or the right. Even when Mournful had been young, he had had a sense of right and wrong which had constantly roused the cowman's admiration. And he would fight at the drop of the hat—when that became necessary.

"How you two think you're gonna help yourselves?" Long asked.

"By refusin'," Staves stated.

"That's it," Partch said.

"You was lined up against this fella a few minutes ago," Long pointed out. "Now you're lined up with him. How come?"

"I ain't lined up with him. I'm just takin' care o' myself."

"Which is a thing that ever' man has a right to do," Mournful put in. "Sorry I hadda put you down, boy."

"Boy! I ain't no boy. I'm as good a man as you are any way you put it."

"Come along," the cowman ordered.

Staves and Partch were disarmed. Mournful, Long and the two punchers still had their guns, and the punchers had the guns of the disarmed men. Staves ran his glittering eyes over the four. Partch regarded them more calmly.

"All right," Staves at length said. "You got me for the time bein'. I dunno what you want, what you think you're gonna do. I might as well find out."

As he moved out from the bar, the door was once more

opened. Keyed up to expectation of anything, all six men looked in that direction. Mournful was startled.

The other Partch, that sullen, unfriendly man, stood just within the door, looking about with peering eyes. Mournful knew that the light in the room would not ordinarily affect a man's vision, even though he had just come out of darkness. But this Partch seemed to have difficulty in seeing plainly.

"Your father?" Mournful asked young Partch.

"Brother," the youngster answered.

"Bad eyes?"

The question seemed to rouse a strange fury in Partch. He wheeled on Mournful and cursed him in a low voice.

"You just leave my brother outa this," he said. "He can take care of himself."

"I was jest wonderin'." Mournful said.

"Wonder to yourself, then."

Mournful closely watched the older Partch. He saw his eyes pick up the group, but he appeared to need several seconds to focus his vision on the men, to make sure that his brother was among them. At last he seemed sure and he approached the six. The two punchers and Long stepped back. Staves had passed them and was standing behind them.

When the older Partch reached the group, he recognized Mournful. He leaned toward him and stared at him. He did not speak to him but faced his brother and said: "Come home."

He spoke in a low voice, scarcely moving his lips, and Mournful saw that those lips were pallid. Indeed in this light the man's whole face was gray. That indicated ill health, though Partch's body was sturdy enough in appearance.

"I can't go home, Pete," young Partch said. "I'm held up."

Mournful expected wild anger to spread through Peter Partch. None did. He remained motionless, scanning his brother's face. Mournful told himself that the man had cold water in his veins instead of warm blood.

"Who's holdin' you up?" Partch asked.

"These here four."

"Not this other fella beyond them three?"

"No."

Partch's eyes went to Long, and, in their turning, Mournful found them almost lifeless. He guessed that

Partch was nearly blind. He recalled Partch's rolling of the cigarette at his home and that his eyes had flashed when he had looked up from its building. That, Mournful supposed, had been a result of the brilliant sunlight striking against the eyeballs. There was no flash in the eyes now.

"You are headin' this holdup, are you?" Partch asked Long.

"It ain't no holdup," Long answered. "There's been a little ruckus. This fella Staves had a few drinks and started lookin' for trouble. The long man is Mournful Martin. When a man starts anything with Mournful, he better be ready to finish it."

Pete Partch turned to Mournful then and examined him for all his length, his dull eyes at last resting on Mournful's face.

"An' who is Mournful Martin?" he asked.

Long left the answer to that to Mournful. It was strictly Mournful's business, the cowman's attitude seemed to say. Mournful was astonished by Pete Partch's control of himself. From what he had previously seen of him, he would have thought Partch quick to anger. Probably he controlled himself because of his dimmed eyesight. Mournful was sure that the gun in his holster would be almost useless unless his target was close. Mournful felt pity. It must be terrible not to have good eyes in a country in which the ability to see was an absolute necessity.

"Why, I'm jest a puncher visitin' down here, Mr. Partch," Mournful said. "My boss has been sick an' I come down here with him. I used to work hereabouts, amongst other places. Far as I'm concerned, your brother is free to go."

Partch renewed his study of Mournful. A sudden, faint light came into his eyes. Again Mournful was astonished. It seemed to him that that faint light was a light of hope.

"You're free, then?" Partch asked.

"Why, yes, I ain't workin', if that's what you mean."

"Where you stayin'?"

"At the Winfield ranch."

"I treated you oncivil when you was at my place today," Partch said. "I'm sorry."

Mournful couldn't make the man out. His apology seemed to the long man to be a kind of appeal to Mournful. Long was not behind Mournful in that recognition.

"I knowed Martin years ago," he informed Partch. "The fastest man with a gun I ever seen."

Partch put a hand to his lips. He pressed the fingers against the lips to still a sudden slight trembling of both.

"My name is Long," the cowman added.

"Whatcha want o' my brother?" Partch asked. "What's he been doin'? He's young. He's like what I was at his age. I've tol' him time an' time again to keep out o' all trouble. It's a lyin' world. A man can't make a good square fight an' get away with it."

"Pete!" the younger Partch exclaimed.

There was, Mournful now saw, something bitter in the older Partch's past. His heart was undoubtedly black with hatred for someone. His affliction lay on him like a curse. That, Mournful believed, had been the reason for his initial rudeness toward Mournful. It was probably his attitude toward all strangers.

Possibly he had to beware of all strangers. That might be the reason why he had bought a run-down ranch.

"Oh, all right," said Pete Partch, to his brother's exclamation. "Now you do whatever Long an' Martin wants you to do, Johnny, an' we'll go home. You said you'd be home by dark."

"Yes, that's right," said Johnny, as if he suddenly remembered. "Well, what is it, Long?"

Mournful was surprised to hear this vigorous youth called Johnny. He should have been called Jack. The Johnnys of the range were somehow usually little, bow-legged men. Mournful had no explanation for that. It was just a fact.

"I tol' you I wanted a talk with you an' Staves," said Long. "I su'jested the back room."

"We'll go there," Pete said.

He started and came face to face with Staves. By this time Staves was somewhat sobered and was part way back to normal. He said to Pete: "We're neighbours. I just bought a place almost on a line west from your new place."

"Where you from?" Pete asked sharply.

"Why, I got a coupla outfits to the north. I'm just spreadin' out a little."

"You mean, to the north in this State?"

"Cer'nly. I don't operate no place else."

"I see," said Pete in relief. "Glad to meet you."

"Your outfit an' mine an' the Winfield outfit will be workin' cows together. Me an' your Johnny had a little misunderstandin'. I guess we better wipe that out. Let's you an' me have a drink together."

"I don't drink," Pete said coldly.

"Let's get goin'," said Long. "We gotta have an understandin' here."

They made a general movement toward the back of this room. They were stopped by a girl who came up and placed herself in front of Long.

"Whatcha think you're gonna do with the golden one, ol'-timer?" she asked.

"The golden one?" Long inquired.

"This here cowboy. I dunno his name. His hair's like gold, ain't it?"

Mournful understood that. He had found that Johnny Partch stood inspection very well. He was, in fact, a handsome brute, likely to attract women.

This girl was young and slender, with clear eyes and clear skin. Her warm blood pulsated under that skin now. She had red hair, a flaming mass of it, coiled low on her neck, and Mournful had learned that red-haired girls generally had tempers.

"Never mind that now, sister," Long said. "We got a little business on hand."

"I noticed that," she said icily. "An' before you begin with your little business, you take his gun away."

Mournful saw that the girl had formed a sudden and complete liking for Johnny. She was game to confront a powerful cowman in Johnny's behalf. She looked like a kind of a nice girl, too.

"We won't be long," Mournful told her.

She flashed a grateful look at him. Her job was to dance with whoever came along, whether he was drunk or sober, but Mournful somehow felt that she usually did that with complete detachment. This Johnny probably had been polite to her. Undoubtedly he knew how to act to win women's respect and liking.

"You ain't game to give him his gun," she said, returning to Long.

"His" and "him," said Mournful to himself. It was as if the golden one had suddenly become to her the only man in the world.

Before Long could speak, Pete Partch stepped up in front of the girl. His hands were clenched at his sides. He leaned a little to focus his eyes on her face.

"I'm the boy's brother," he said in a strange voice. "Go back to your dancin' an' leave him alone. He ain't got no use for women of any kind. You hear me?"

"Pete——" Johnny began.

Pete wheeled on him. His face was ashen, and Mournful suddenly realized that the cowman's tan was not on his skin. He looked now as if he might have been shut away from air and sun for a long time. In a prison? Mournful asked himself.

And then Mournful saw that the ashen look came from rage. Pete apparently had no use for women himself and had decided that his brother should have no use for them. It looked as if the older man had appointed himself guardian of the younger.

Pete's head was lowered, so that the lower whites of his eyes were free of the lids. He was, Mournful perceived, in an ugly and a commanding mood.

"Shut your mouth an' keep it shut," he ordered. "I've tol' you often enough what you can do an' what you can't do. You come to town to get tobacco an' other supplies. Instead o' comin' home as I tol' you to do, you started hangin' around this hell-hole. Keep still!"

Another moment of astonishment was Mournful's. Johnny had proved that he had spirit and nerve. Mournful expected him to flame out at Pete and tell Pete to go to hell. Instead he said in a low voice: "All right, Pete. Whatever you say."

Pete returned to the girl. Though Johnny had yielded, Pete would not relent toward the girl. He said, in a sort of dead tone: "Go back to your work."

His eyes were as they had been when he had wheeled on Johnny. The girl proved that somewhere, deep in her probably, there was a streak of kindness.

"You're pretty near blind, ain't you, mister?" she asked gently.

"Get to hell away from me!" Pete said in a raised voice.

"All right, mister."

She remained where she was sufficiently long to give the golden one a lingering look. The return he gave her was careless.

"Girl," said Mournful to himself, "you're on your way to heartbreak, if you don't look out. To this boy you're on'y another girl. He ain't found his real girl yet."

Then the proprietor came up. He would not have interfered with anything that Long was doing, but when one of his employees mixed in, the thing became his business. He had heard Pete's loud order to the girl.

"Go back to your work," he told the girl. "What do you mean by interferin' with these gents?"

Johnny proved himself gallant, even though he was not specially interested in the girl. He swung a hard right on the proprietor's jaw, and that gent dropped like a steer struck between the eyes with a swung mallet.

Johnny grinned. He seemed to have relieved himself of some of the boiling spirit that was his. He took the girl by the arm and led her out on the floor and left her there. Her lingering look remained on him as he returned to the other men.

"Come on now before there's any more trouble," Long said.

"I oughta give this fella a hand," Johnny said.

"Nemmine him. He'll be took care of. Mebbe he had it comin' to him. He ain't no special friend o' mine anyhow."

They went at last to the back room. Long and Pete seated themselves and the other men stood.

"Here's the meat o' the thing," Long said at once. "You three is new here. You know as well as I do, I s'pose, that we've had our share o' trouble in this country. I've come to see, in my late years, that the time to nip trouble is right in the bud. My good gosh, we've had rustlers in here, thieves, killers, Gawd knows what; but when a coupla cowmen starts a little war all their own, it's too damn much. We know how to deal with outlaws, but quarrels between cowmen is diff'runt."

"Why, the trouble was between Martin an' me really." Staves said. "He wouldn't take a drink with me an' him an' me had rode to town together."

"That shore is one of the most pitiful tales ever I heard," Long stated. "If Mournful don't wanta take a drink, he don't take it. As for you: I reckon I got you figgered. You're a decent, law-abidin' citizen 'cept when you get tanked up. Then you wanta drill holes in every man that don't do just what you say."

"It was like this, Mr. Long," Mournful put in. "In his own country Staves had a repertation—well deserved prob'ly. He forgot that that repertation hadn't come ahead o' him."

"The first thing I gotta tell you, Staves, is not to mix with Mournful," Long went on. "Damn it, the man is poison with a gun. I dunno how good you are, but he's better. You can put that in your book. They was

plenty gunmen in this country when he was here before, but they all learnt to go shy o' him. He don't start nothin' unnecessary, though. For instance, he don't try to make another man do what he don't wanta do 'less there's a good reason for it. In short, he minds his own business except when the under dawg is gettin' the worst of it. You play the game the other way round."

Staves, practically normal now, eyed the floor. When he looked up he smiled. He said slowly: "I guess I made a mistake in goin' up against Martin. Mebbe I had it comin' to me. I don't bear you no ill-will, Martin."

"'Course not!" Mournful said. "Nor me you."

"Now as for you, son," said Long to Johnny, "you walked right in where you wasn't wanted."

"I——" Johnny began.

"Shut up, Johnny," Pete again ordered. "Long wouldn't be sayin' that if it wasn't true."

Johnny shut up, and Long went on to Partch: "You're a man o' peace. I can see that. Now my su'jestion to you is that you keep this hot-headed brother o' yours to home. I could make it an order."

"The hell you could!" Johnny spat out.

"I'll keep him to home," said Pete softly. "Won't I keep you to home, Johnny?"

Johnny turned suddenly stricken eyes on Pete and said, in a voice as low as Pete's had been: "Yeh, you'll keep me to home, Pete. Shore you will! I'll do anything you say!"

Though Pete's tone had been soft, his face was not. It was grim and forbidding. Mournful saw that he somehow had the power to rule Johnny. The whole thing, so far as those two were concerned, was kinda thickenin' up. That Pete man had been through the mill. Hard! Johnny had known little or no trouble. He was a gay sort of a fightin' man; an' that kind, Mournful silently asserted, got inta trouble sooner or later.

"How 'bout you, Staves?" Long asked, with eyes averted.

"Well, how about me?" Staves demanded.

Proud, Mournful said. Proud as all hell, a man that took orders from nobody. Too used to givin' orders himself, prob'ly. An' mebbe he was a little bit ashamed of what he did when he was in his cups.

A strange situation here, all through, Mournful told himself. Not a really bad hombre in the outfit. Nobody

you could dispose of with a gun. Staves had only his one weakness apparently. Pete Partch had somethin' behind him—on'y Gawd knew what. Still he had power over the golden one.

"About you, Staves?" Long asked. "Well, I'll just tell you. Don't you get drunk an' start wavin' that gun o' yours. When you come to town to fill your tank, you stable your horse an' leave your gun in the stable before you take one drink. If you go linin' up to any bar with a gun on you, I'll have you took care of."

"That's an order, is it?"

"It's an order," Long declared.

"An' s'pose I tell you to go plumb to hell?"

"That's your priv'lege, but I mean what I say."

"Long," Staves cried, "you can go to hell! No man is my master! No man tells me what to do!"

"Mournful," said Long, "if you find him drinkin' with a gun on him, would you be willin' to take it from him?"

"Fer his own sake," Mournful quietly answered. "He's too good a fella to get inta a jam right here when he's startin' a new outfit."

"An' you, too, can go to hell, Mournful Martin!" Staves said.

"I ain't no angel," Mournful cheerfully said, "an' I don't never expect to be one."

"You think I'm afraid o' your gun?"

"I hope not. I hope you ain't afraid o' nothin'. But whisky courage is one thing an' courage that carries a man on his way through hell an' high water is another. I think you got plenty o' that last kind, Staves."

"Do you know what I think about you?" Staves asked. "I think you're a cheap, braggin' fool. You claim you got all the nerve there is. Your friend here says you got it. Well, mebbe we'll see."

"Mebbe we will," Mournful said. "It don't make no diff'runce to me."

CHAPTER IV

DISCHARGED

WHEN THE MEN came out of the back room, they found the proprietor having a drink, probably his second or third. He was rubbing his jaw. He had, however, sufficient courage to walk up to Johnny and face him.

"Don't you never set foot in my place again," he said.

"Don't worry," Johnny cheerfully returned, "I won't."

"An' if you even come to town, you may find yourself goin' up against somethin'."

"You mean I can't even come in for supplies?"

"That's what I mean."

Johnny laughed down at the man, a person of meagre height and breadth. The man's veined face took on a look of cruelty.

"Let it go," Long advised. "You got a little tough, you know."

"All right, Long," the man said. "You know I'll allus lissen to you."

Mournful saw that he yielded because he must. If Long took it into his head he might send a bunch of his many men in here and level this joint. However, the man seemed to demand someone or something upon which to vent his wrath. He looked out on the dance hall floor and his eyes alighted on the girl.

He walked swiftly towards her and spoke to her sharply, though Mournful could not hear what he said. He saw the girl draw back as if the saloon keeper had struck her. Then she started toward the door, her head bent.

Johnny must have observed the two, for he intercepted the saloon keeper when the saloon keeper returned.

"What'd you pull off?" Johnny asked.

"You see her leavin', don't you?" the saloon keeper inquired.

"You fired her, huh?"

"I done just that."

"You dirty pup!"

Johnny's fist was swinging at his side. He had drawn his body together, and Mournful knew that he was very angry. His impulse was to crash his fist into the saloon keeper's

face. That, Mournful said, was pretty good. Johnny cared nothing about the girl, but he was squareshooter enough to want her to have a fair deal.

" Johnny ! " said his brother.

Johnny relaxed and stepped back. The saloon keeper smiled a sour smile and went to the bar and had another drink. Mournful saw that Johnny was watching the girl as she opened the door. He then looked at Pete inquiringly, but Pete shook his head, and Johnny remained where he was.

Pete had exercised his power again, whatever it was. Mournful saw that Pete intended to keep Johnny away from all girls, and Johnny gravitated toward girls as naturally as a desert-dusty man toward water.

Well, said Mournful Martin, that girl was going out into the night alone. It was likely she didn't have much money. She might not have stage fare out of this saloon-ridden town. She was, in a word, up against it, and that brought Mournful's long suit into play.

" I'll see you again, Mr. Long," he said.

" All right, Mournful, an' if you need anything in the next few minutes, lemme know."

" You see too much," Mournful said, and went outside.

The girl was standing at the corner of the building, her head bent, a handkerchief pressed to her eyes. Mournful walked up to her.

" It jest couldn't be as bad as all that, ma'am," he said.

She jerked down the handkerchief and turned her back fully to him while she wiped away her tears.

" Bad as all what ? " she questioned.

" Bad enough to make you cry."

" You're a funny lookin' man," she said.

" That's the way to talk ! Jest look me over good an' mebbe you c'n git a laugh outa me. I don't mind none what-ever."

" You're a gunman, ain't you ? "

" No, ma'am. I'm on'y handy with a gun. There's a diff'runce. Me bein' handy with a gun has helped me to help a lotta other people from time to time."

" I s'pose you go around the country lookin' for people to help ? "

" No, ma'am. I jest go around the country. I ain't never had no trouble findin' people to help."

" It's a rotten world," she declared.

" No, ma'am, it ain't. It's the fines' world we got.

Go on an' tell ol' Mournful Martin. You'll feel better even if he can't do nothin' for you."

"What am I goin' to do?" she broke out.

"What's your name?" he asked. "I allus kinda like to begin at the beginnin' o' things. Then there ain't no chance of a mix-up."

"My name is Cora Masters."

"Well, ma'am, what's the trouble right this minute?"

"I ain't got money enough to get out of town, to go back home. I ain't got money to stay here. I've got to leave or stay. That oughta be clear enough."

"You got a home?"

"Yeh, a home—with an ugly stepfather in it."

"So you struck out on your own?"

"Yeh, an' I just had money enough to get this far."

"I could stake you to your fare home, but I reckon you don't wanta go back to that ugly stepfather."

"I can't. He wouldn't take me in. He never wanted me to have any fun."

"You ain't got no place to go, then?"

"No. I tried to get work here but there wasn't any, so I went to work in that place."

"An' didn't like it?"

"Well, no!" To Mournful she suddenly became a shy little girl. She asked: "Who is that man?"

"The golden one?"

"That was a silly thing to say. It slipped out before I thought."

"He's a cowman over where I'm visitin'—in that country. That fella that looked some like him is his brother."

"A cowman," the girl sighed, as if that placed Johnny far from her.

Mournful thought the thing out. Now, if he had just been at home, he could have taken the girl to Margaret Danforth, old Danforth's daughter-in-law. He might take her to Emily Winfield. Still, Emily might not want to hook up with a dance-hall girl, though this girl had taken such a job out of desperation. Yet Emily had been through the mill before she had married George Winfield. Her father had been in trouble and Mournful had helped straighten him out. Emily was as happy as a bee in clover now, and mebbe she wouldn't remember enough to befriend this girl.

At length, in his mind, Mournful turned to Danforth.

The old man could find a way out for this girl. He would ship her up north if that became necessary. Danforth could be as hardboiled as hell when he had to be so, but he had his soft spots; and one of those was as to all weak things, especially weak things in distress. Not that this girl was weak exactly. She had shown nerve in the saloon. Well, she was up against it and Mournful could not let her remain so.

"C'n you ride a horse?" he asked.

"Well, yes."

"Stay here a minute," he said. "I ain't got no horse. Mebbe I c'n git you one."

"What'd I do with a horse?"

"Ride it!"

Mournful started for the door. Long, the two Partches, and Staves came out together. Staves acted as if he had had a few more drinks. His head was up and his body seemed stiff. Mournful knew that he was spoiling for a fight again, but, though his gun had been returned to him, he went to his horse, released it from the rack, mounted, and rode away.

He did not even look at the girl. Mournful thought nothing of that at the time.

Johnny Partch stopped and looked at the girl. His brother spoke to him in a low tone. Johnny withdrew his eyes and followed his brother in mounting. The two rode away. Mournful and Long were alone.

"What help you want, Mournful?" Long asked.

"You know Danforth is out at Winfield's?" Mournful asked.

"The hell he is! Well, tell him I'll be over tomorrow."

"You know ol' Winfield is dead?"

"Dead? How?"

Mournful told him how Winfield, George's father, had been murdered a while back.

"I hadn't heard or I'd be over there. I'd known Winfield for many years. You was in the thick o' the business, huh, Mournful?"

"Oh, we scotched a snake or two. You know George Winfield is married?"

"No. Marry a nice girl?"

"You bet! An' what I'm leadin' up to is—I want a horse for her."

"Gonna take her out to Winfield's?" Long asked dubiously.

"Well, in that gen'ral direction at least."

"Mournful, you haven't changed a little bit!" Long exclaimed.

"A lotta times I've thought o' changin', but it proved to be too damn much trouble. Anyways, I didn't know what I might change into."

"You go down to the stable an' tell the hostler I want him to lend you a good horse," Long said. "Tell him if he don't do it I'll be round in the mornin' an saw off one of his laigs."

Long passed the girl on his way to the hotel and he touched his hat brim. The girl was looking after him with wide eyes when Mournful returned to her.

"He's a big cowman, ain't he?" she asked.

"One o' the biggest around here."

"He must be a nice old man."

"Oh, he's good enough. Now, I expect you got some truck you wanta take along. C'n you make it up into a saddle roll?"

"Yes. I have a satchel but it's old an' not worth takin' along. First I gotta know where we're goin'."

"Out to the Winfield ranch."

"Who'll be there?"

"A nice girl that got married a month or so ago."

"Will she give me a job?"

"Ma'am, I'm hopin' so. You never c'n tell about people, though. If she turns you down, ol' Danforth is out there an' he c'n figger four ways from the ace. He'll know what to do."

"It'll have to be a job for me or nothin'."

"Cer'nly. I ain't aimin' to make no beggar outa you."

"An' why do you do this for a girl you never met before?"

"I give it up. What do you think about it?"

"I give it up, too. I didn't know there was a man in the world like you."

"I hope there ain't another. It'd be tough for him. Now, you go git that roll ready. If you can't make a saddle roll, I'll do it for you."

"I can make it."

"I'll meet you here?"

"Yes. The roll won't be big, I can tell you."

"So long, ma'am," Mournful said, and went down the street.

His argument with the hostler was brief, and he presently

rode back, riding his own horse and leading one for Cora Masters. She soon approached, carrying what might have passed for a saddle roll. Mournful put it on the horse.

As they were about to start, Mournful saw a rider nearing. He told the girl to wait. When the rider was close enough, Mournful recognized him as Staves. Staves stopped his horse in front of Mournful's, again ignoring the girl.

"You'll notice I came back, Martin," Staves said.

"I'm noticin'," said Mournful coolly.

"An' I'm wearin' my gun. I'm gonna wear it right into that saloon."

"I wouldn't do it, Staves! Long has got punchers in there. He didn't tell me, but I'm sure he left some men to take care of you if you come back. I guess he kinda thought you'd come back."

"I'm back," Staves said, "an' with my gun where it gen'ally is."

He rode to the rack, dismounted, tied his horse, went up on the platform and entered the saloon. No sooner had the door closed than Mournful was on the ground. Telling Cora to stay where she was, he leaped on the platform, ran to the door and threw it open.

Staves was standing half a dozen feet from the door, his eyes roving the room. Three punchers, the two who had acted before, and another, were lined up together at the bar. In another instant, Mournful was sure, they would step out. Mournful drew his gun and aimed it at Staves's back. He was thoroughly angry. This damn fool hadn't been able to go home and keep the peace. He had come back, especially to look for trouble.

"I got a gun on you, Staves," Mournful said coldly. "Make one move toward your gun an' I'll blow the hell outa you."

Staves's body stiffened. Very slowly he turned his head and looked at Mournful. If he had expected to find any sign of meekness in Mournful, he was disappointed. The long man stood there, his gun aimed, his hand as steady as granite.

"Put 'em high," Mournful ordered.

Again the fiddles had stopped their scraping, the crowd, increased somewhat while the men had been in the back room, waited expectantly. It was significant that no one moved toward cover. There was something about that long man that informed everyone that if there was any shooting it would be over in a split second.

Mournful saw Staves let his eyes drift over the crowd and he took from their attitudes that inescapable fact of what they thought. Slowly Staves lifted his hands, shoulder high.

"Up, farther," Mournful pressed.

A sort of groan escaped Staves's lips as he sent his hands high. Mournful walked up to him and took his gun. He nodded to the three punchers and one of them walked down to him and took the gun.

"Don't give it back to him tonight," Mournful said. "Leave it with the bartender when Staves decides to go home finally."

Mournful holstered his own gun and started for the door.

"Martin!"

Staves's voice crackled as he spoke the one word. Mournful stopped, turned without haste. He did not speak, only icily regarded Staves.

"I'll kill you for this, Martin," Staves said.

"I hear you say it," Mournful returned.

"Next time we meet, no matter where it is, go for your gun," Staves ground out. "There ain't room in this country for you an' me."

"I've heard that said so often that it's wore out," Mournful retorted. "So long!"

As he reached the door, he looked back. Staves was advancing toward the bar like a man in a dream, sleep-walking. Mournful could easily guess what was in his mind. He was used to being respected as a gunman when he had been drinking. Tonight, in this new country, he had been able to get precisely nowhere. His hatred must be burning in his heart.

Mournful waited till he ordered a drink. When the bar-tender set out bottle and glass, Staves said in a thick voice: "Leave the bottle there."

He took three drinks in rapid succession. Then he poured a fourth and let it stand. Then he either felt Mournful's eyes on him or had known all along that the long man had not left the room.

He turned and fixed Mournful with eyes that were now wild. He apparently saw the uselessness of saying more, and he contented himself with a long, brilliant stare.

Then he began to curse Mournful. He cursed in a steady stream. At last Mournful had more than enough. He broke in: "Staves!" Staves stopped cursing and listened.

"You're crazy now," Mournful said. "Whisky is

poison to you. Some day you'll get in the shape you're in now an' you won't never be no better. Chew on that when you sober up!"

With that the long man opened the door and went out into the night. He almost collided with Cora.

"Why didn't you stay on your horse?" Mournful asked sharply, for he was naturally burning from the oaths which he had permitted a wild man to apply to him.

"I was afraid for you," Cora said timidly. She put on Mournful's arm a hand which was timid too. "Don't be cross with me, mister. I'll do just what you tell me to do. You're a great man."

Mournful's little smile played across his lips.

"Ma'am," he said, "you don't need to mention that. It's one of the best known fac's in his'try."

CHAPTER V

Acceptance

As Mournful and Cora approached the Winfield ranch house they found it dark. There was no light in the bunk house either. However, Mournful kept on steadily. He observed nervousness in Cora.

"They've all gone to bed," she said. "We can't wake them up."

"Mebbe *we* can't," said Mournful, "but *I* can. I've done it often enough in other places."

"Who's here?" she asked.

"Ol' Danforth. You'll like him. Then George Winfield an' his wife."

"You think those two won't like me or me them?"

"I didn't say so. We jest gotta take a chance. I'm bankin' on Winfield. His wife I don't know so much about. Y' see, this place is home for her, an' her previous homes ain't been nothin' to shout about. What her new ease has done to her I can't tell you. People is diff'runt from each other."

"So I've heard," said Cora.

"That's the way," Mournful said. "Jest be ready for anything, an' you'll be all right. I'll stick to you till I get you some place."

They rode in and stopped at the rear corner of the house.

Mournful did not want to waken Danforth unless he had to do so and he therefore knocked on the door lightly instead of hailing. Cora remained on her horse. In spite of her one attempt to be humorous, Mournful saw that she was none too hopeful.

George Winfield presently opened the door. He was only partly dressed and he stared down at Mournful. The fact was that he had not been asleep. He had been wondering what had happened to Mournful Martin. He had been calling himself names because he had let Mournful take over a job which should have been his.

"Trouble, Mournful ?" he asked.

"None whatever," Mournful said.

Then George caught sight of the girl on the horse. He stared anew but only briefly.

"Oh," he said, "come in, miss. I'll get my wife up."

He acted as if he knew that Mournful was seeking shelter for the girl, and he did not ask who she was or what she was. He only offered the usual invitation.

"I reckon I better stay where I am till you talk to your wife," Cora said. "Martin is tryin' to find a job for me. I'll work. I know how." Her tone became hard from bitterness. "I learned how when I was a little girl."

Mournful walked to her horse and said: "Get down, ma'am. Nobody is gonna shoot you or hang you, y' know."

She dropped down from her horse and looked down at her clothing, a pair of overalls and a much-patched waist. At last she shrugged her shoulders and went ahead of Mournful to the door. George had gone back into the room and he now lighted a lamp.

"Just set down a minute, ma'am," he said. "I'll have my wife in here in a minute."

It was several minutes before Emily Winfield appeared. She came slowly and Mournful had a notion that she had asked her husband quite a few questions about a girl appearing here in the night.

Mournful told Emily what the situation was, and Cora quickly added : "I wouldn't stay here or any place else if I couldn't work for my keep."

Emily had been eyeing her, and Mournful knew, from her unsmiling face, that she had got out of George the fact that Cora was out of a dance hall.

"There really isn't any work for a girl to do here," Emily said.

She seemed to become aware that her husband was observing her closely. She returned his look. Mournful had expected to find defiance in her expression, possibility of condemnation. But Emily suddenly flushed as she looked at George.

"Of course we could find some light work for you," Emily said, keeping her eyes on George instead of turning them to Cora.

"We don't want you to tàke her in 'less you do it of your own free will," Mournful said, a little sharply.

He did not add, as he might have done, that Emily herself had needed help and shelter a while ago.

"Since I came here I haven't done anything that I didn't do of my own free will. You must be tired, Miss Masters. I'll show you where you can sleep."

"I think we better go on, Martin," Cora said. "There must be a ranch somewhere that could use a girl willin' to work. Don't you know somebody that has an elderly woman doin' the work? I could take over everything. I know how to run a house."

"Why, what's the matter with this place?" Mournful asked innocently.

"Oh, nothin'. Only if there ain't work for me, I can't stay here."

She did not accuse Emily of doubt and indecision, and she rose in Mournful's esteem. Her temper could be fiery but she had held it in check.

"You're staying here," Emily said. "It's past midnight. We can't let you ride any more tonight."

"But about work?"

"We'll find plenty. There's always enough work around a ranch house."

Cora now had a moment of indecision. Mournful saw that she resented Emily's tardiness.

"I'll bring your saddle roll in," said Mournful. "You need rest, I reckon, an' you'll get it."

Well, Emily didn't do things by halves. She suddenly smiled at Cora, and she did not evade.

"I'm sorry I wasn't quicker," she said. "But I——"

"It's all right," said Cora. "Any little cubby hole will do for me to sleep in. In the mornin' just tell me what I'm to do an' I'll do it. I been workin' in a dance hall. I want you to know that. It was the only work I could find."

Mournful went out to get the saddle roll. He was entirely

satisfied. He had quite a little information about Emily, and he was sure she would stir herself to make amends for her slowness.

When he took in the slender saddle roll the two girls had disappeared.

"Put it down, Mournful, an' we'll go outside," George said. "I gotta know what all this is about." When they were outside, George asked: "This girl is hooked up with the gen'rul situation, ain't she?"

"Not much. I'll tell you all about it."

"Well, it looks as if the girl thinks a lot o' young Partch, even though they met only tonight."

"That's it."

"I turned my troubles over to you," George said. "Now it looks like Long was gonna mix in."

"You never c'n tell how things is gonna spread," Mournful said. "Long'll be a good man to have on your side. He's strong in this country, an' he could bring an army o' punchers inta the game."

"It's queer about them two Partches," George declared. "Seems like they ain't gonna run no cow ranch. You s'pose the older brother is hidin' out from somethin'?"

"I ain't doin' no s'posin'. Anyways that would be no never-mind to us. The man is nearly blind. He can't do you any harm. The young fella likes a good time. He's li'ble to push in where he ain't wanted, jest for the fun of it. That, I reckon, is the worst you can say about him."

"Staves is dangerous, like I had been tol'," George said.

"Yeh. If he had gone on home there might be some hope for him, but he come back, disobeyin' Long's orders. Long had them three punchers ready for him. I dunno jest what Long will do when the punchers report to him about what Staves done."

The moon was high in the sky now and the side of the bunk house, where George and Mournful squatted, was in the full flood of its light. Therefore they knew they were at once seen by the rider who suddenly appeared from the road. Equally, the rider was recognized.

"Staves," Mournful said. "Leave him to me."

Staves whirled his horse to a stop in front of them. Mournful, against his usual rule, had drawn his gun, and he now held it on Staves.

"No use to hold me up," Staves said. "I've had all the gun play I want for one night."

Mournful supposed that he referred to what had occurred

in the saloon. He hesitated briefly and then holstered the gun. Staves seemed sober. Mournful was sure, in that condition, he would not draw his gun. He would not have come here at all. It then occurred to Mournful that something else might have happened. Yet where had Staves got a gun? The punchers who had taken it over in the saloon would not have given it back to him there.

"Martin, I gotta talk to you," Staves said.

Mournful saw that Staves's breathing had become rapid and hollow, as if he had taken too big a dose of some drugs. That wasn't possible, and so Mournful came to the conclusion that the rapid breathing was due to excitement which must be running through Staves.

"You c'n talk here," Mournful said. "This is George Winfield. He owns this outfit. You're on his property."

"Howdy, Winfield," Staves said, and George only nodded.

Staves seemed not to notice the absence of a returned greeting. He said to Mournful: "I gotta speak to you alone."

"Nothin' doin'."

"Martin," said Staves earnestly, "I give you credit for bein' everything Long said you was. I'm sorry I went back to town, but I ain't used to bein' ordered around. Fact is, I'm in a jam, an' I've come to you."

"Why to me?"

"Because you got a good head on your shoulders. I need somebody's good help."

"Go along with him, Mournful," George urged. "If he wants a helpin' hand, he's come to the right place to get it. If you ask me, I think he's a damn fool when he starts drinkin'." He paused, looked at Staves. "I've heard what you done tonight. It's a laugh to imagine you tryin' to make Mournful Martin do somethin' he didn't wanta do."

"I re'lize that now," Staves said. "Mournful, come down along here a little way."

"Oh, all right," Mournful relented.

Staves remained on his horse while Mournful walked down toward the corrals. Then Staves dismounted. He stood looking at Mournful for some time.

"Spill it," Mournful ordered. "You won't find out nothin' more about me by lookin' me over than you know now."

"All I asked is a square deal."

"You'll get it."

"My Gawd, Martin," Staves broke out, "I killed young Partch in the road a few miles from here!"

"You drunk some more, did you?"

"Yeh, I was pretty well lit up when I come on Partch. I asked him was he layin' in wait for me."

"He laughed at me, tol' me what a fool I was. Then he went so far as to explain that he had forgotten the supplies he had gone to town for. He had left them in the stable. His brother allowed him to come back, I s'pose, on his word that he wouldn't go near a saloon. He musta kept his word, because he didn't come inta that place where we was."

"I'm ridin' home, I tol' him, an' he said I wasn't ridin' home till I apologized to him. I said there wasn't nothin' for me to apologize for, if anything he owed me an apology. Well, one word led to another, as usual; and then the boy went for his gun. Martin, I swear to you that that's the truth. I had all I could do to get my gun on him in time. His gun was in his hand. He fell off'n his horse when my bullet hit him. I examined him an' he had stopped breathin'."

"What'd you do with the body?"

"Pulled it back in among the trees. What I come to you for was to ask you what to do."

"There ain't nothin' for you to do 'cept to say to everybody that you killed the boy. If I was you, I'd go to town tomorrow when you was sober and tell the town marshal all about it."

"What you said about me dependin' on my repertation, Martin, was true. I didn't have no right to drag a gun in that saloon. All that'll come out if I have a trial. The thing looks black to me. I've worked hard for what I got. I'm just startin' in this country. I can't give it all up."

"I s'pose you never thought that you'd come to this sooner or later because you drawed your gun when there was nothin' to draw for. That boy was on'y a boy. You shoulda bore that in mind. He wouldn't have shot you. He was jest skylarkin'. You seen how he busted in in the saloon."

"I know, I know. It's all clear enough to me now, but I thought for sure he was gonna plug me when he went for his gun."

"You're in a kind of tough place. Nobody but

me knows anything about the shootin'. You can go home an' start about your business. There ain't no witnesses to accuse you."

"Yeh, I s'pose you think I'm the lowest of the low," Staves said. "I ain't. The man that can say I ain't on the square when I'm sober don't live. I gotta face the music, I reckon. I'll go to the marshal tomorrow."

"It'd be a good idea not to take a drink either," said Mournful.

"I won't take a drink. Damn it, I've had enough of the stuff. I could play I was a hard hombre up home, but it didn't work down here."

"The first thing to do is to get the boy's body and take it to his brother," Mournful declared. "That's gonna be a tough errand. I got an idea that the boy was Pete Partch's eyes most of the time."

Staves drew himself up and exhaled loudly.

"That'll be my job," he said. "I'll do it right now."

"Wait till I git a horse an' I'll go with you," Mournful said. "Pete Partch has got somethin' on his mind. I b'l'eve he'll try to kill you. *Your* gun ain't gonna be no good against him. You killed his brother. If you killed him you'd be strung up. They's plenty people now that know he don't see none too good."

"Yes, that's right," Staves agreed. "Well, come with me, Martin."

As the two rode past George, Mournful merely called that he would be back before long, and George was silent.

Mournful and Staves rode to the spot at which Staves said he had killed Johnny Partch.

"What'd Johnny's horse do?" Mournful asked.

"Shied over to the trees. It had quieted down before I left. Its head was droopin'."

"It ain't here now. We better see if it's about. We don't want it goin' home to that half-blind man with nobody aboard it."

Mournful dismounted and stepped through the trees some little distance from where Staves said Johnny's body lay. He scanned the moonlighted flat, but nothing was in sight. He and Staves then hunted among the trees, but there was no trace of the animal.

"I guess the horse is gone," Mournful said. "Too bad. That half-blind man will be ridin' from here to yonder by now. Well, let's have a look at the body."

Staves led Mournful in among the trees. He suddenly

stopped and uttered a sharp exclamation of dismay. He said: "The body ain't here. It's been took away."

"Stay where you are," Mournful ordered. "I'll handle this business from now on."

He went to the edge of the trees and hunted for sign. There was none that he could discern. There was no use in examining the trail which led to the Partch ranch. That was constantly used and hoof marks would be plentiful.

"One o' two things happened," Mournful informed Staves. "Either you didn't kill the boy or somebody come along an' took it up."

"They couldn't see it from the road," Staves objected.

"Where'd you get the gun you're wearin'?" Mournful asked.

"I allus carry a second gun in my saddle roll. I allus make up a roll when I'm ridin' far."

"You're a killer, Staves," Mournful said.

"No, oh, no! I never killed a man before."

"You're on your way to become a killer, then."

"By Gawd, no! If I get outa this thing, I'll never touch a drop. I'm all right when I'm sober."

"I know that," Mournful conceded, "but it looks to me like you had took your bucket to the well once too often."

Staves stiffened. Then he drew his gun and handed it out to Mournful. Mournful took it, for he believed that Staves was not dependable. He might change his mind about facing whatever there was to face, and then he would use his gun to escape from the man whom he had made his confidant.

"What'll we do first, Martin?" he inquired.

"I think we better find that body. When you left the saloon them cowboys mighta followed you. They might have seen the flash o' your gun or have heard the report but couldn't get here in time to nab you. If they seen you, they know who killed the boy. We better ride over to Long's. That's where the boys would take the body. They would want Long to tell 'em what more to do."

"All right," Staves just whispered, "I'll face Long. I got an idea that if the boy's body has been brought in, Long will have me strung up. I can't deny I drunk some more an' was some under its inflooence when I met up with Partch. I don't expect Long will b'l'eve anything I say."

"Long won't have you strung up. He's for peace, especial among punchers an' cowmen. I guess he wants

everybody to bury their diff'runces, so if rustlers or thieves come along, everybody will be lined up. Long must have ten thousand cows by now. He had a lot o' them when I was last down here."

"Hangin' or no hangin', we'll go see him," Staves asserted.

"Did it ever occur to you what a fool you are to drink ?" Mournful asked. "Why, man, drink changes you from a decent citizen to a fool, a devil, in fact."

"I never even meant to kill nobody," Staves said. "I just wanted to get the repertation in this country that I had up north. It was fun. Least, I thought it was. I liked to make men dance to my tune. Besides, every little while I get tired of cows an' grazin' lands an' hills an' mountains. I like to go to town an' forget everything."

"You got somethin' now that you ain't gonna forget for one little while," Mournful stated.

"I know it. Well, let's get along. How far is Long's place from here ?"

"Oh, we c'n get there by daylight. The ol' man will be up by that time unless he's changed his ways."

At daylight they rode into the Long ranch. They rode bang into a big bunch of punchers getting ready for the day's work, with Long watching them.

However, he turned to Mournful and Staves as those two reached him. His eyes, suddenly cold, studied Staves briefly and then they rested on Mournful.

"What now, Mournful ?" he asked. "What's this fella been up to now ?"

"I wanta tell you one thing, Mr. Long," said Staves. "I went back to that saloon with a gun on me after you'd tol' me never to do it again. I killed young Partch."

For a while Long stood looking at Staves. His face slowly hardened. Mournful saw that he was controlling an outburst. He had tried to establish peace, and a trouble-maker had disobeyed his injunction.

The punchers were about ready to ride. Long hailed them and they stopped their horses.

"Stay where you are," Long called. "I don't want no man to leave."

Mournful saw a shiver run through Staves. He thought he was about to be hanged. Mournful knew, however, that the shiver was not caused by cowardice on Staves's part.

It was only that Staves loved life and believed that, for him, life was about to end.

CHAPTER VI

"Fight Me Now!"

"Whatcha know about this killin', Mournful?" Long asked. "You got the killer in tow. Did you see the shootin'?"

"No," Mournful began. "I on'y——"

He had been about to say that he knew only what Staves had told him, but Staves's pride seemed to have surged up in him.

"Wait, Long," he said. "I'll tell what there is to tell. It'll be the same thing I tol' Martin."

Long eyed him closely and then said: "You prob'ly lied to Mournful an' you'll prob'ly lie to me. But go ahead. There wasn't no witnesses, huh?"

"None."

Staves told Long what he had before told Mournful. Not one statement varied from his previous statements. And he concluded: "That's the truth, Long. I may be a fool drunkard, but I don't lie—not even to you."

"I b'l'eve him, Mr. Long," said Mournful. "He's a pretty decent kind of a fella when he leaves whisky alone."

"But he ain't got sense enough to leave it alone. Well, where's the body now? I'd like to have a look at it. Sometimes wounds gives you a little infermation."

"We rode to where Staves said he killed young Partch, but the body wasn't there," Mournful said. "There wasn't no sign we could pick up. Partch's horse was gone, too."

"Oh, is that so?" Long snorted. He turned fiercely on Staves. "What'd you do with that body, fella?"

"I placed it in a certain spot an' took Martin to the spot. That's all I done with it."

"If he had hid the body, intending to deny ever'thing about the killin', he wouldn't have come to me an' tol' his story," Mournful pointed out.

Long stood looking at Mournful as if he didn't see him, so deeply was he plunged in thought. At last he said: "I can't see no trick in him comin' to you, so I reckon his story is true. Well, we gotta find that body."

"I had an idea that them three punchers you left in

the saloon might have run on to the body," Mournful said.

"If they did, they didn't bring it here," said Long. "Point o' fact, they ain't come home yet. I tol' them to stay in town for a few days."

"To lay for me, huh?" Staves blurted.

"Just that. Well, Mournful, I'll give you all the men you want. How many?"

"None a-tall. I'm goin' over to the Partch place."

"Takin' this fella with you?"

"Cer'nly."

"I'll go over to the Winfield ranch an' see Danforth," Long said, "You can find me there, Mournful, when you finish at Partch's. If the boy is really dead, you got a sad job on your hands. That older Partch's affliction oughta be enough of a load for any man to carry."

Mournful and Staves rode away.

"That older Partch can't be much good with a gun, I guess," said Staves.

"You ain't got no gun to use on him," Mournful said. "You better git this gunplay stuff outa your mind. It's on'y piled up trouble for you at last."

"I don't pick on crippled men like that older Partch," Staves said. "I don't aim to drink any more or to use a gun 'cept to pertect myself."

"That's the way you feel now. You got a lotta days an' weeks an' months ahead o' you when you'll hafta bite your tongue to keep away from a saloon."

"You'll see," Staves promised.

"I wish you all the luck there is," said Mournful. "Me an' Danforth will be in this country for a long time, prob'ly till next spring. If you need help, you can call on me."

"You're queer, Martin. One minute you're gonna blow the daylights outa me an' the next you're my friend."

"Oh, I don't think our friendship is gonna upset either of us. I ain't sayin' I'm your friend. If you ever flourish your gun again unnecessary, we'll be anything but friends. I mean that, fella. I ain't never been bothered none by this here modesty, an' I'm tellin' you now I'm too fast an' too sure for you. Now let's get along."

They got along, and when they rode into the Partch yard, they found the older Partch in the doorway. Pete Partch did not pretend now that his eyesight was good. He frankly peered, with his head thrust out.

"Oh, it's you, Martin," he said. "An'—well, I'll be

damned—it's that fella Staves with you. Whatcha got him in tow for, Martin ? "

" Where's Johnny ? " Mournful asked.

" Why, he's around some place, I reckon."

" You seen him this mornin' ? "

" Um—no. Why, what's the matter ? "

" Partch, I got bad news for you," said Staves. " I dunno how you'll take it. I wanta say first that your brother went for his gun."

" The boy'll get inta trouble some day, draggin' his gun just for fun," said Partch, as if he were not interested in the bad news.

" I'm afraid he won't get inta no trouble no more."

" Why not ? "

" Because——"

" Stick 'em up, Staves," came an order from the corner of the house. " I got you covered two ways."

Both Mournful and Staves looked toward that corner. Johnny Partch was standing there with a gun in each hand. Staves did not put up his hands. He seemed stupefied.

Pete Partch came down from the step and placed himself between Johnny and Staves.

" I tol' you to stay in the house when I heard these men comin'," Pete raged. " An' now you're out here with a gun in each hand. Damn it, I give you your chance. You wouldn't take it. All right ! "

Pete quickly turned and hastened into the house. Johnny cried : " Go after him, Mournful. Stop him ! He's gonna kill himself."

Mournful leaped from his horse and ran into the house. Pete was doing no more than drinking a glass of water.

" Take it easy, Martin," he said. " They's on'y one way I can make the boy mind—that's by pertendin' I'll kill myself if he goes off his head . . . . I aint gonna kill myself . . . . Well, I dunno. . . . I guess I'm goin' blind. My sight seems to get worse an' worse. . . . Look out, I think the boy's comin'."

Pete put down his glass and stood before Mournful. Both men were in drooping attitudes when Johnny appeared in the doorway.

" You ain't gonna do it, are you, Pete ? " Johnny asked.

" I been talkin' to Martin," Pete truthfully answered. " What I do depends on what hell you raise. I tol' you I couldn't stand no more hell. I've had enough of it."

" I know, Pete. I know good an' well. But am I gonna

let that fella Staves go free? He dragged his gun on me an' creased my head. I got a right to take a chance with him."

"You wouldn't have no chance," Mournful declared. "He's too fast for you, son."

"What's he doin' here with you? I can see he wanted to find out was I really dead. Damn it, I held my breath to make him think I was. No man can crease me an' get away with it."

"I dunno if Staves could get away with it, but he could crease you. He done it once."

"He didn't mean to crease me. He meant to kill me."

"I think mebbe we better go outside an' let the boy speak his piece to Staves, Partch," Mournful told Pete.

Partch had, on the occasion of Mournful's visit, put him gruffly aside. Since the incidents in the saloon, he seemed to have formed a profound faith in the long man. Mournful was convinced that he trusted him more than he had trusted any other man in a long time.

"All right," Pete said simply.

The three went outside. Staves was still sitting his horse, his hands down. Johnny stepped aside and again covered Staves.

"I tol' you to put 'em up," he said.

Staves's face was at first white, now it turned red. Mournful knew that he was suffering acutely because a mere boy was forcing him to obey a command; and he was that boy's master with a gun.

"Fight me now!" Johnny said.

"I have no gun," Staves said through stiff lips.

"You got his gun, Martin," said Johnny. "Give it to him."

Mournful debated that silently. He still did not know how far he could trust Staves. Staves was feeling mighty miserable, Mournful saw, and Johnny might press him too hard. Mournful had no intention of letting a fight occur here. For one thing, he had to think of Pete. He was profoundly sorry for that man.

However, Staves had a right to his gun. Johnny had foolishly challenged him. On even terms with Johnny, Staves could kill him, though Johnny was not altogether a slough with a gun.

"All right, Johnny," Mournful said at last. "You got a grievance against Staves, but you gotta remember you got one against me too. You know what I did to you in that saloon."

"I ain't got no feelin' against you, Martin—none whatever," Johnny stated.

"You may have to gunfight me jest the same—after you've killed Staves."

"I wouldn't do it. You're too square. Pete says you are, an' Pete knows men."

"S'posin' Staves is my friend?" Mournful asked.

"Hell, he ain't! Don't you s'pose I know what brings you here? You come to see if I was still alive."

"What would lead me to b'l'eve you wasn't dead?"

"I dunno how you found it out," Johnny snorted, "an' I don't care a damn. You gotta gimme a chance at Staves. I didn't do nothin' special to him. Pete, you ain't gonna stop me, are you?"

That was a rather hard test for Pete. He had confidence in Mournful, but he had known him so brief a time. He was aware that Mournful was fast with a gun. For all the information Pete had, Mournful might hire out his gun. He might have hired it to Staves.

For a moment, therefore, Pete was doubtful. At last he looked at Mournful and found Mournful's slight smile on his lips.

"You can go ahead, Johnny," Pete said.

"Give Staves his gun, Martin," Johnny ordered.

Mournful held the gun up toward Staves. For an instant Staves's eyes were brightly eager. Then that light died and he slowly shook his head. Mournful stepped back with the gun in his hand.

"Why, you rotten coward," Johnny roared. "You're a great gunman an' you're afraid to fight it out with me."

Staves said nothing; he held his mouth tightly. His eyes were dull. Mournful looked on with intense interest. He hoped Staves would go all the way through with this.

"Ain't you afraid?" Johnny taunted.

Still Staves was silent, and when Johnny cursed him, he stood for that too.

"Get off'n your horse," Johnny stormed. "If you won't gunfight me, you'll fight me with your fists."

"I'm no fist fighter," Staves broke his silence. "All I want is to ride outa here. I thought I had killed you. I went to Mournful Martin an' tol' him. We rode to where I had left you an' your horse was gone. We went to Long's an' I tol' Long I had killed you. He had a big bunch o' men behind him. Still I tol' the truth. You won't see me in no saloons no more. I've had my lesson."

" My gosh, you're gonna sprout wings," Johnny sneered. " Hell, you pup, you're just makin' a play because you're afraid of me."

" Johnny Partch," Mournful said, " that's a lie! How do you like that kind of talk ? "

" I s'pose I gotta take it from you."

" Yeh, you gotta take it from me, because you're too slow for me by many seconds. You're actin' like a damn fool. You went for your gun before Staves did."

" That's a lie from you, Martin ! " Johnny cried. " Me an' this fella drawed together."

" Right together ? "

" Right together."

" An' he creased you," Mournful scorned. " What in hell chance do you think you'd have with him now ? "

" I ain't afraid of him. I'll meet him again some day."

" You better leave him alone. Long is for peace over all this yere land. He's got men to enforce peace. If you start anything with Staves, you'll be startin' it with Long. You better think that over."

" I ain't afraid o' Long. I ain't afraid o' you. I ain't afraid o' this fella Staves. You can just make out from that whatever you wanta. I wouldn't be surprised if you was a big bluff, too."

" That's all," Mournful said, and smiled.

" Aw, you make me weary ! " Johnny cried, and stamped into the house.

" That was good, Mournful," said Pete. " You're not on'y nervy, but you know how to handle men."

" Oh, shore," Mournful said. " Well, I'm glad Johnny is among the livin'. Me an' Staves will be goin' on. Any time you want anything from me, Partch—if Johnny should get inta a jam or somethin'—just lemme know. I might be able to give you a lift."

" Could you ride over here in a day or so ?" Partch asked.

" If it's somethin' special."

" It's special. I dunno what it'll mean in the end."

" I'll be over tomorrow," Mournful promised. " It'll keep till then ? "

" Oh, yes."

Mournful and Staves rode away.

" I'd like to go over to Winfield's and tell Long myself, if he's got over there, that Johnny is alive."

" Come right along," Mournful invited, " an' here's your gun."

He held the gun out to Staves. Staves sat staring at it for a while.

"You think I can be trusted with a gun, Martin?" he then asked.

"Shore! You can't be asked to go withouta gun when ever'body else wears one most o' the time."

"Martin, I thank you," Staves said thickly. "You've brought me to my senses."

"Naw, you brought yourself. I got an idea that your run-in with Johnny was a good thing. The boy's kinda wild but he wouldn't shoot a man outa hand. All you gotta do with him is to refuse to draw with him, refuse to fight him in any way."

"That'll be my play."

When they arrived at the Winfield ranch they found Long there, having just arrived. He was deep in talk of older times with Danforth. However, he looked at Staves as Staves dismounted and approached him.

"Mr. Long," Staves said rather stiffly, "young Partch is over at his ranch, alive. I didn't kill him after all."

"You're lucky," Long said.

"I just wanted to tell you, myself."

Both Danforth and Long gave Staves steady looks. At last Danforth said: "That's the way to do things, son. Long was tellin' me about your run-in with that boy."

"You're Mr. Danforth, ain't you?" Staves said.

"Yes."

"Well, I—I thank you double for sayin' that. I'm pretty low in my mind."

"Oh, forget it," Long said.

"There's one thing I'd like for you to do, Mr. Long."

"What's that?"

"I wish you'd take back your order about me wearin' a gun in town. If I don't get drunk an' wave a gun in some saloon, I'd like to be able to say that I done it 'thout no order from anybody."

"For all o' me," Long stated, "you can wear a gun wherever you like. You can go to town tonight an' shoot up that saloon you was in an' you won't get a peep outa me."

"Couldn't you make it an order, Mr. Long?" Mournful asked.

"Get away from me, Mournful Martin, you damn scoundrel," said Long, and he and Danforth laughed.

As Staves turned toward his horse, Cora Masters came

outside. Staves was in a position to see her at once. He gave Mournful a look, and Mournful walked beside his horse for a way.

"Who's that nice little girl?" Staves asked.

"She *was* a dance hall girl," Mournful explained. "You seen her in that place in town, but you didn't pay no attention to her."

"No; I didn't pay no attention to her—then," Staves murmured. "Well, so long, Mournful. Ride over an' see me when you ain't got nothin' to do."

"I will."

Mournful started back toward Danforth. Danforth had risen and was about to go into the house. Mournful knew that Emily had sent Cora out to tell Danforth it was time for him to rest. Well, that was fine of Emily. She was trying to make Cora feel at home; to give her a chance to speak to Danforth in connection with what was, just now, important to the old cowman, the restoration of his health. In the few minutes required to get Danforth into the house and to make him lie down, Cora would get better acquainted with him than if he had spent a month merely nodding to her or passing the time of day.

When Long had left and Danforth had gone into the house, Mournful rolled a much needed cigarette.

He had heretofore wondered what kind of hook-up Cora could possibly have in the general run of happenings. Staves had solved that. A man didn't look at a girl as Staves had looked at Cora without having a quick, deep feeling for her.

"Ever'thing," Mournful told himself, "is comin' out real nice."

He knew that he had the job of reconciling Staves and Johnny, but he thought that wouldn't be difficult.

For the moment he forgot that he was to see Pete Partch next day—that man who had been through the mill and might go blind some day. He believed that the peace which Long had worked for would soon be established.

CHAPTER VII

JOHNNY-JUMP-UP

MOURNFUL did not continue to forget about Partch. He started for the ranch at noon. He had, of course, told Danforth about Partch's request.

"You ain't had any real trouble yet, Mournful," said Danforth. "Soon's you're through with Partch come back here. I wanta know what's the matter with that man. 'Course, if he ties you up, you can't tell me anything."

"Why, Mr. Danforth?"

"I'll tell you," Danforth answered, acting as if he were explaining something to a child. "If you tol' me, after you was tied up, you'd be breakin' your word. When a man breaks his word, he gets a black spot on his honour."

"I do b'l'eve that's right." Mournful solemnly stated. "I'm glad you tipped me off, Mr. Danforth."

"For a long time I been tryin' to get you to run straight," said Danforth as if wearily. "Every once in awhile I'm ready to get up an' out an' leave you to your fate."

"But, Mr. Danforth, a man c'n on'y do his best."

"Well, get along an' don't shoot nobody in the back. Ac' like you was honest, brave an' true, every inch o' you."

"From the soles of my shoes—I mean boots—I got a lot o' inches," Mournful said. "Couldn't I let my legs up to my knees do whatever they wanta do?"

"Well, all right. That'll give you a number o' inches that you won't have to bother about."

"Well, I'll get goin'," said Mournful. "While I'm gone, you obey orders about your eatin' an' drinkin' a lotta water an' gettin' your afternoon rests."

"Yes, Mournful," Danforth said meekly.

"So long!"

"Watch yourself, Mournful," said Danforth seriously. "You ain't got no line-up on that Partch fella."

"I'll be careful, Mr. Danforth," Mournful promised, as seriously.

He rode away. He was glad he had had that moment of foolish talk with Danforth. The old man was getting more like himself every day. Up north, at the Danforth ranch,

Mournful had had some terrible days and nights, when Danforth might have passed along. Danforth had been more like a father to him than an employer.

When Mournful came within sight of the Partch ranch house, no one was, again, in sight. Mournful rode in. This time he hailed the house. Johnny suddenly appeared in the doorway, a gun in his hand.

"Whatcha think you're doin' here?" Johnny demanded.

"I come here on your brother's invitation."

"He's changed his mind. I tol' him that if he gave you any information about anything, you'd spread it all over the range."

"You lied like a horse thief, Johnny, an' you know it. Where's your brother? I ain't got no business with you. I wash my hands of you from this minute on."

"My brother went for a ride after he changed his mind. He left word with me that he didn't wanta see you. I'm tellin' you that."

Mournful dismounted, walked up to the step and laid his gun on it.

"I'll wait," he said.

"The hell you'll wait! Get off'n this ranch. Half of it belongs to me."

"I'll jest wait on your brother's half."

"I tell you you can't wait here!"

Mournful's temper grew warm. Damn such a fella as Johnny Partch. He had persuaded his brother not to meet a man who could help him, and Mournful was sure that he could help Partch. Partch had been equally sure, it seemed to Mournful, else he would not have asked Mournful to come over here.

So Mournful sank down on the step. Johnny said: "I could bring my gun bar'l down on your head."

"I wouldn't if I was you. Every ol' cowman in this country knows me. Not one o' them but is my friend. If you wanted to be hung, you couldn't find an easier way than by knockin' me out. Before I come over here I tol' Danforth where I was headed for. He won't wait long till he sends a bunch o' men here. You wouldn't have no more home than a rabbit then. You'd be dodging around in the hills. Soon you'd have no food. Whatcha think o' that?"

What Johnny thought of that he expressed in no mild terms. Mournful shivered as Johnny applied names

to him. He was gettin' a little too much of Johnny's intemperate talk and actions.

"I don't often let a man get away with what you're sayin'," he informed Johnny. "I'm holdin' myself in, but I don't know how long I can keep on doin' it. Oh, shut your mouth, boy. You think you're a proud an' haughty man. In my opinion you're a damn fool. W-e-l-l, you're young. Mebbe you'll have better sense after a while. You'll have to change your ways if you're to git very far in this country."

In this moment, at least, Johnny didn't change his ways. In fact they were emphasized. He suddenly holstered his gun, without Mournful's being able to see him do it. Then he dropped down on Mournful and put one hand on Mournful's forehead and one on his throat.

"You're as big a coward as Staves," Johnny cried. "Damn you, you're afraid o' me, just like Staves was."

Mournful was not interested in that statement. He was interested only in freeing himself of Johnny. Johnny was not attempting to choke him, so he believed he could take his time. Sooner or later Johnny must move his hands. He moved them sooner. Withdrawing his right hand, he struck Mournful a heavy blow on the back of the neck. Everything went gray for Mournful. He felt Johnny strike him in the same place again and the grayness turned to blackness.

He did not know that he fell off the step and lay huddled on the ground. When he recovered sufficiently to be able to see, he found Pete Partch bending over him. He sat up, though the act was almost beyond his present strength. At length he got to his feet. Johnny was nowhere in sight. He took a moment while his strength came back and his vision became normal.

"Where's your brother?" he demanded.

"In the house, Johnny is," Pete said. "I read the riot act to him an' he'll be good from now on."

Mournful looked back at the step from which he had fallen. His gun was gone.

"Your brother took my gun, he cursed me, an' hit me from behind," he said coldly. "I want my gun an' then I want to face that young whipper-snapper."

"Oh, not with a gun in your hand, Mournful!"

"He put a gun on me the minute I rode in here," Mournful said. "He tol' me he p'suaded you to be away

when I come. Said you didn't have nothin' to tell me. That's all right. Your business is your business. You c'n get help from some place else. Soon's I settle with your Johnny, I'll leave."

"How do you know I need help?" Pete asked.

"It's written in your face, an' you didn't ask me over here to give me a nice warm cup o' tea. Now, tell that brother o' yours to bring my gun out here."

"Mournful, don't kill him," Partch pleaded. "He's all I got."

"I ain't gonna kill him," Mournful said impatiently, "unless he puts a gun on me. Next time he does that he'll be runnin' into somep'n that won't improve his health none. Hell, he don't take nobody's word for nothin'. He heard what Long said about me, but he ain't payin' no attention. I'm older than when I knowed Long years ago, but I'm as good with a gun as ever I was, mebbe a little better. If you c'n get it over to that cub that he wouldn't have no chance with Staves or me, mebbe we'll be able to get along."

Pete moved over to the door and called to Johnny. Johnny's response came faintly to Mournful. Then Johnny appeared in the door way. He said sarcastically: "An' down went the great Mournful Martin, the hottest gunman in all the world."

"Give me my gun," Mournful said.

"It's here, layin' on a table. Try an' get it."

"Suits me."

Mournful started for the door. Johnny brought up his gun. Mournful did not stop. He was sure that Johnny would not dare shoot him. Even if Johnny should dare, Mournful was doing the thing he believed he had a right to do.

"Stop, Martin," Johnny ground out, "I'll kill you if you take another step."

"Johnny," came from Pete, "if you pull that trigger, I'll pull mine. Kill Martin an' I'll kill you. I can see you plain enough."

Johnny looked at his brother, lowered his gun. Mournful sprang. He collided and both went backward to the floor, Johnny's gun falling to the floor. He had taken the full force of the fall, since Mournful landed on top of him, and he was somewhat stunned.

Mournful struck him on the side of the jaw and he gasped out his breath. He was motionless under Mournful, but

Mournful struck him again. He was bound to give him a maximum dose of his own medicine.

That second blow finished Johnny for the time being. Mournful rose, took hold of Johnny's ankles and dragged him outside, his head bumping on the step. Then Mournful placed him in the same spot from which the long man had recently risen. He did not take time to examine the youngster. He knew he would not die.

Mournful went into the house, picked up Johnny's gun and got his own from the table. Going outside, he put Johnny's gun in its holster.

"Mournful, no!" Pete said. "Don't let him have his gun. He'll be wild when he wakes up."

"An' I won't kick none about that," Mournful stated. "I ain't never seen a wild man that was worth a whoop in hell. Leave him be, Partch."

Partch let his brother be, but he aimed his gun at Mournful. He said: "There ain't gonna be no killin' here. Move aside, Mournful, while I take his gun from him."

"Don't you try it," Mournful said. "There'll be a split second when you'll stoop to get his gun. That split second will be jest about long enough for me."

"Martin, put up your hands."

"Not me!"

"I gotta take your gun."

"You can't do it. I won't put up my hands, an' I won't let you take my gun. You ain't gonna shoot me. I reckon I'm here because you asked me to come. How do you think the cowmen an' punchers would line that up? You don't wanta stretch a rope, Partch."

Partch looked at Mournful for long. Then he holstered his gun.

"I forgot why you was here," he said simply. "I've seen men loored to places an' then murdered, but I ain't that kind. I never committed no crime. I swear to Gawd I never did."

"An' that's what you wanted to see me about," Mournful said.

Partch stood looking at his brother now. Momentarily his face was dark with resentment, but it swiftly cleared.

"You guessed right, Mournful," he said in a low voice. "I let my brother talk me outa seein' you. He said you'd tell everybody you met. I reckon that scared me. I see things clear now. I'm gonna tell you all about it."

"Your brother is comin' to," Mournful said. "We'll have to wait an' see what satisfaction he wants."

Johnny, being young and vigorous, came to swiftly. He did not sit up experimentally; he rose to his feet. Instantly his hand went to his holster. There was a look of astonishment in his eyes as the hand encountered the gun butt.

"Take your hand away from that gun," Pete ordered. "You been a fool, an' I'm stoppin' you from becomin' a bigger fool. If you kill Martin, both you an' me will be fugitives. I *know* you'd run away."

"You think that o' me, your own brother?" Johnny asked in bewilderment. "Why, you an' me never deserted each other, did we?"

"I ain't desertin' you now," Partch retorted. "Fact is, I'm stickin to you closer than a brother."

"By holdin' me up when I got an honest fight on my hands."

"You ain't got no *honest* fight," Pete declared. "You knowed that Mournful come here because I asked him to. He was our guest."

"Not mine! I didn't ask him here."

"Well, what do you wanta do now?" Mournful asked. "Remember I'm a gunman, shades faster'n you."

"I'll shoot it out with you!"

"You're crazy, Johnny," Pete stated. "Why do you think I asked Martin over here? Why do you think I was gonna try to line him up? Well, it was because he's so fast with a gun."

"How do you know he's fast?"

"My Gawd, ain't I mixed with gunmen, good an' bad, all my life!"

"Boy, get wise to yourself," said Mournful. "You wouldn't stand no chance with either Staves or me. You don't wanta die so young, do you?"

Johnny regarded the ground. Love of life was strong in him. He had known some dark days because of the trouble his brother had got into, but the sun of high spirits quickly shines through where youth is concerned.

At last he looked up and said: "I'll fist fight you, you sucker."

Mournful drew his gun and handed it to Pete. He moved away from Pete and stood facing Johnny, an unarmed man.

"Gimme your gun, Johnny," Pete ordered.

Johnny also handed over his gun. As Pete took it,

Johnny turned slowly toward Mournful. Mournful thought he was going to say something, and the long man was off guard.

Johnny launched his body toward Mournful, his hands outflung to seize Mournful. Mournful's nerve reaction was about as perfect as any man's could be. He stepped aside and Johnny flung himself past him. As he did so, Mournful struck him hard on the side of the jaw. Due partly to the blow and partly to the fact that he had expected his body to collide with Mournful's, Johnny went prone. He lay there fighting off darkness, Mournful knew. In a moment he sprang up and lifted his hands.

"You're just about as good a fist fighter as I am," Mournful said. "I c'n hit hard when I can connect, but I don't know no more about gettin' my hands up right than you do. However, come along in."

Johnny came along in. Mournful saw that he was still somewhat dizzy from the blow, for his advance was not on feet altogether steady and his eyes had lost some of the brightness of youth.

"You better take a minute to get your breath," Mournful said. "That was a pretty hard sock I give you. You laid yourself wide open."

That seemed to infuriate Johnny. He swept in on Mournful, and this time he succeeded in landing a blow high up on Mournful's face. Mournful felt a quiver of weakness go through his legs. His knees were not supporting him as they should have done. He was saved from another blow by Johnny's stepping back to discover what he had inflicted.

He seemed to think that Mournful was almost out on his feet, and, grinning, he dropped his hands. Mournful sprang and succeeded in landing the side-of-the-jaw blow again. Johnny's knees sagged but he remained on his feet. However, the blow had weakened him and Mournful slammed a blow to his jaw again. Johnny dropped and lay still.

"I'll be ridin', Partch," Mournful told Pete. "I guess there ain't nothin' doin' around here for me. I been havin' a nice rest at Winfield's. I'll jest go back there an' lay me down."

"Mournful, stay here," Partch pleaded. "I had you come over here so't I could explain somethin' to you. Johnny talked me outa it, but I'm right back to where I was when I asked you. Come on into the house."

"All right, but I want this Johnny to be on his feet before I go. I wanta see what he intends to do next."

CHAPTER VIII

"The Truth?"

What Johnny did next was to rise and almost stumble into the house. Mournful and Partch followed him, but he was not in the room into which they went.

"Johnny," Pete called.

"Whatcha want?" Johnny asked from beyond a half-open door.

"I want you to come out here. I'm gonna tell Mournful Martin everything."

Johnny appeared. His jaw was swelled, but he refused to finger it to see how badly he had been hurt. Mournful knew that he was ignoring it and trying to lead his brother and Mournful to ignore it. Neither of those two said anything about it. After a first glance they did not look at Johnny's face.

"Sit down an' rest yourself, Johnny," Mournful said.

It was a genuine effort to get to Johnny on Mournful's part, but Johnny would not respond. Mournful guessed the young fool hated him bitterly, and the beginning of that had been in the saloon in town. Well, Mournful told himself, he could wait. Johnny would have to come around before long—if what Pete was going to disclose amounted to anything, and Mournful was sure that it amounted to a great deal, on Johnny's account as well as Pete's.

"Now babble to this fella, Pete," Johnny rasped. "I don't give a damn what you do, but I'm tellin' you that you might as well mount a horse and ride all through this country, yellin' out your business to every man you met."

"*I* might do somep'n like that," Mournful said.

"I don't doubt it. You ain't the kind that c'n be trusted with a secrut. You ain't got no more sense o' honour than a jackrabbit."

"That's right," Mournful agreed.

"You hear him, Pete?" Johnny inquired.

"I hear him, but he's on'y foolin', Johnny."

"It takes a fool to fool," Johnny said. "You got plenty money. So have I. You can hire a *good* outfit as well as you can hire this one killer."

" I can't hire Martin," Pete stated simply. " He ain't that kind."

" Oh, my Gawd ! " Johnny exclaimed.

He dragged a chair to the far end of the room and sat down. His action indicated that he was not going to be in on his brother's disclosures. Mournful turned in his seat and looked at him.

" You c'n get outa your head any idea that my gun is fer hire," Mournful said. " I ain't mebbe got as much money as either o' you two, but I got enough for all my purposes, an' I c'n get all the backin' there is in this country."

" Yeh," Johnny snorted. " I expect some night you an' a bunch o' killers like yourself will be ridin' up here. Well, I'll tell you how it all will be for you : We ain't got a cowhand on the place. We ain't got a cow on the range. Schofield sold all his cows before we bought this place. When we did buy it we had plenty left of our money from the ranch we sold up north."

" How far up north ? " Mournful asked.

" None o' your business."

" Oregon," Pete said.

" Oregon's my home," Mournful said. " Don't you like that country ? "

" Like it ! " Pete exclaimed. " I'd give anything to be back to where the grass grows tall. There ain't no range in all the world like the Oregon range."

" You don't have to tell me that. Well, let's get on."

" I was pract'ly run outa that country," Pete continued. " There was a gang o' rustlers doin' a lot o' dirty work. They didn't touch my cows, but they drove off cows from my neighbours. Pretty soon cowmen an' even punchers asked me why it was I didn't lose nothin'. I didn't attach no importance to the questions. I thought it was no more than a question. I was sure all them men merely thought I was lucky.

" A bunch o' punchers an' cowmen met up with that gang, as they was bound to do sooner or later. They killed some, some got away. Some was took to jail at the Dalles. When them was tried, they declared that I was the leader o' the rustlers' outfit. The fact was that the leader escaped.

" I was put on the stand. I didn't know why at first. I learnt soon enough. The first question I was asked was whether I had lost any cows in the gen'rul rustlin'. I

said I hadn't lost none. Then that sarcastic fella asked me why. What could I tell him? I guess I kinda stuttered around. They placed me under arrest right there in the courtroom. When I was give a trial, I got five years. Them men who was some of the real rustlers got on'y a year apiece. It was explained to me that them fellas got off light because they was on'y members o' the outfit. I learnt later that they had turned what was called State's evidence. It was just as if them an' the prosecutor was framin' me. Well, I spent over four years in prison."

"That," said Mournful, "was tough, you bein' innocent."

"Don't let him fool you by that line o' talk, Pete," Johnny called.

"He ain't foolin' me none. Didn't you hear him say his gun wasn't for hire?"

"Aw, he's just puttin' off the time when he'll come down on you."

Mournful was sensitive to an imputation which reflected on his good intentions. Again he turned in his seat.

"Boy," he said sharply, "I got all I c'n stand from you. I don't care a damn whether you got any use for me or not. But don't you curse me or accuse me any more. I won't stand for it."

"Half o' this house is mine. I'll do an' say what I wanta in it."

"Not to me you won't! Now shut up, 'less you got somethin' to say about your brother's trouble."

"I wouldn't tell you nothin' if I was dyin'," Johnny declared.

"Keep still, then."

Johnny kept still.

"You met up with any o' that outfit since?" Mournful asked Pete.

"Not in my home country. I seen two of them in the town here, las' week."

Johnny rose and hastened up to his brother's side. He asked: "Whatcha mean?"

"Just what I say. I saw two of them fellas in town."

"An' you didn't tell me!"

"I seen them ride outa town," Pete said. "They might just be driftin' south. They couldn't do no more business in Oregon. For all I know they was on their way south, mebbe inta Ol' Mexico. They must all have money."

"You coulda tol' me just the same."

"I knowed you'd start out after them."

"You wouldn't do that, but you'd let this Martin fella do it."

"I'm askin' his help because I know he's a fightin' man."

"An' I ain't?"

"A fightin' man but not hotheaded?" Pete said. "You gotta keep a level head in cases like this."

"If them fellas wasn't headed south they was lookin' for you," said Mournful.

"That's it. I can't fight no good fight no more. I can't see well enough. I gotta have help. I ain't gonna let them fellas frame me again. Mebbe they wouldn't try to frame me. Mebbe they learnt I had sold out an' come down here."

"But they would have had five years to hang around."

"They knowed when I would be released from prison. They might have come back at that time. Them fellas ride all over the cow country, y' know. Well, I pulled the deal so fast an' got outa the northern country so fast they didn't know what was goin' on. Me an' Johnny rode in the night an' hid out in the daytime. Y' see, I hadda leave that country, Mournful. Cowmen an' punchers, b'l'evin' me guilty, wouldn't have anything to do with me. I woulda been alone in the world 'cept for Johnny. I'd have had to hire every driftin' puncher to get along. An' prob'ly them would have struck when they heard the talk about me. I had a big outfit an' I knowed I couldn't get help for round-ups. What could I do but blow?"

"Nothin'," Mournful agreed. "Where's your money now?"

"Under a board in the floor here. More'n——"

"Pete," Johnny cried out, "do you think this fella is gonna overlook that money? Why, he's on'y a puncher. Forty a month or so."

"When I trust a man, I trust him," Pete said simply. "I trust Martin. I don't see why you can't understand that we need help, Johnny. You want that outfit to sweep down on us some night an' burn our feet an' make us tell where the money is?"

"They couldn't make *me* tell," Johnny asserted.

"Oh, yes, they could," Mournful said. "You ain't never had a hot runnin' iron tickle the soles of your feet. You ain't never smelt burnin' flesh. The man that can

stand that just to perfect his property don't live. Many men would do it to perfect their families, but not for no other reason. By gosh, boy, I ain't never seen a man with less sense than you got."

"Pete'll find out about his money," Johnny said. "Half of it is mine."

"Well," said Mournful, "I'll leave your half. I'll on'y rob your brother."

"An' that's just the kind of statement I'd expect from you," Johnny ground out. "You're foolin' my brother but you ain't foolin' me."

"What amount o' money is there, Partch ?" Mournful asked.

"Don't tell him !" Johnny fairly screamed.

"More'n a hundred thousan' dollars. I hadda sell cheap, o' course."

"Which board ?" Mournful inquired.

Reluctance came to Pete. He had only *felt* that Mournful was a squareshooter. That wasn't much to go on. But about the other men in this country he had no feeling, though he had met a few of them. He didn't exactly trust old Long. He knew of many rich cowmen who were dishonest.

However, it dawned on him that he might as well go the limit. Mournful had been informed of the whereabouts of the money, generally. He could easily bring an outfit that would tear up the floor.

"Your feet is right on the board," Pete said.

"Johnny," said Mournful, "I hope that proves to you that I'm hones'. Can't you see that I'm *above* money ?"

"What a rotten joke !" Johnny exclaimed.

"I guess it was," Mournful conceded. "But it takes a good man to joke when he's talkin' about so much cash. I won't be able to get to it, though."

"You must think I'm simple !"

"Yeh, that's right. You ain't done nothin' since first we met that'd make me shout. I tell you I can't get to that money, fer the good reason that you're gonna remove it f'm under the board an' hide it some place where the devil himself couldn't find it."

"There, you see, Johnny," said Pete.

A change came over Johnny, indication of a little relenting toward Martin.

"You mean that, Martin ? You won't hold me up when I take out the money ?"

"Me an' your brother will go outside while you dig it up. Then we'll come back inside while you find a hiding place."

"I bet you hold me up, soon's I come out with the money. It's in a box."

"Well, I'll bet you over a hundred thousand dollars that I don't hold you up."

"You ain't got no hundred thousand dollars."

"I know it, but I'd have your hundred thousand. I couldn't lose."

"Go on outside," Johnny ordered.

Pete protested. He said that if Mournful were going to hold up Johnny he could do it at any time, outside or inside.

"He may think now that he won't do nothin'," Johnny said, "but when he gets sight o' that box, knowin' what's in it, he may change his mind."

Mournful drew his gun and put it on the table. He said: "Come on, Pete, I can't hold him up if I ain't got no gun."

"Johnny, I'm ashamed of you," Pete declared, but he followed Mournful outside.

Johnny appeared at once and went to a shed and returned with a wrecking bar. As Mournful waited there was the sound of a board being ripped up. There was then a pounding and Mournful knew that the youngster was replacing the board.

"You had much trouble with him, Pete?" Mournful asked.

"Oh, I s'pose if I hadn't got into that jam up north, I wouldn't think much o' what he does. But my nerves ain't any too good. I worry for fear he'll get inta a jam. He ain't afraid o' trouble."

"He proved that in town."

"He don't drink over much an' don't gamble at all. He likes to dance. He likes girls, too. The few he's met like him too. He can put up a front with them."

"Some day he'll fall fer a p'tickler girl," Mournful said.

Johnny came out, carrying a small metal box. He stopped a few feet from the door.

"You can go back inside," he said. "Pete, be sure he don't watch where I go."

"Pete better watch on his own account," Mournful smiled. "You'll prob'ly hide that box an' forget where you hid it. Then some dark night you'll make off with it, leavin' your brother pract'ly penniless."

Johnny turned quickly, and Mournful was happy to

convince himself that he had turned so that he might hide a smile.

Mournful and Pete went into the house, and Mournful sat with his back to the one window. Suddenly Johnny appeared in the doorway, the box still under his arm.

"To hell with it," he said. "I guess you ain't no thief, Martin."

"You better guess again. Go hide that box in some safe place. You took that board as if you was gonna wreck the hull floor. Anybody comin' here for the money would see that board right off'n the reel."

"Um, I guess that's right."

"I'll tell you, Johnny," Mournful said. "You've had so many busts o' temper that you ain't usin' your head. If you was to ca'm down you might be a great help to your brother an' me."

Johnny went out an' was gone for a long time. Mournful and Pete sat in silence. Then Mournful asked: "You've tol' me the truth, Pete ?"

"So help me Gawd, I have. I know you might think I was a thief, hidin' out here, but I ain't. I wouldn't have tol' you where the money was if I'd been a crook."

Johnny returned. There was sweat on his face.

"Did you dig a good deep hole ?" Mournful asked.

"Yeh," said Johnny in a low voice, "an' I'll tell you where it is if you wanta know."

"I don't wanta know," Mournful said: "but, Johnny, trouble may be brewin' for you an' your brother. Let's you an' me be friends."

Mournful put out a hand and after a moment Johnny took it.

"I gotta trust you," the youngster said.

"You c'n," Mournful asserted. "Now, you go out an' get a horse for your brother an' one fer yourself. We're all three ridin'."

"Where to ?"

"Now, don't git suspicious again. We're goin' first to Winfield's, next to Long's, an' then back to Staves's."

"You think I'm gonna let Staves do anything for me or Pete ?"

"He's a good fella," Mournful declared. "From now on he's gonna leave whisky in the bottle. Besides, he's met a girl."

"I ain't seen a girl in this country since me an' Pete come here," Johnny said.

"They's some nice girls around if they all growed up," said Mournful. "Some day me an' you'll ride an' I'll interduce you to all o' them. By gosh, I'll have Winfield get up a dance. How would you like that?"

"Man!" Johnny breathed.

"But bear in mind that you can't marry all o' them," Mournful said.

"Oh, I ain't the marryin' kind."

"That's great! All women is treacherous."

"The hell they are! They's lotsa nice girls."

"An' now," said Mournful dryly, "jest git them two horses."

When the horses were brought up Mournful looked at Johnny. He wanted to press Johnny a little. He would have to learn to stand the gaff.

"I've changed my mind," Mournful said. "We'll go to Staves's first."

"You're proddin' me, Mournful," Johnny declared. He looked at Mournful steadily and then added: "All right. We'll go to Staves's first."

When they arrived at Staves's they found Staves aimlessly—somewhat nervously—wandering about the yard. Good cowman that he was, Mournful had a notion that he usually worked with his men.

The three men rode up to him and dismounted.

"I'm glad you've come, Mournful," Staves said. "I been wishin' you would." He turned to the two Partches. "Excuse me for a minute. . . . Oh, it's you two. Well, excuse me for a minute. I gotta talk to Mournful."

"Staves," said Johnny, "I'm sorry for what's happened between us. I don't want no more trouble. My brother's with me in that."

"Is that crease all right?" Staves asked.

"Oh, shore. Stings once in a while, but that's all."

"Glad o' that," Staves said. "Yeh, we must have peace."

"We could use a little somep'n to eat too," Mournful said. "It's kinda hard to keep the peace on an empty stummick."

"We'll fix that up," Staves said. He turned back to the Partch brothers. He smiled a little and shook his head. "These long men can eat more'n a horse."

"But not the same kind o' fodder, I hope," Mournful said.

The three men laughed together, and Mournful knew that peace at last lay between them.

Mournful and Staves withdrew. Staves said: "Mournful, I gotta see that little girl over at Winfield's. I ain't thought about nothin' but her since I met her. She's got me goin'. Think I could put my rope on her?"

"You could try, but if I was you I wouldn't rush her."

"How can I see her?"

"Why, ride right over to Winfield's. Get Mrs. Winfield to interduce you. Jest tell yourself that it's a battle but that you ain't afraid."

"But I *am* afraid. I'm afraid the girl won't even look at me."

"That'll be tough, but you'll have found out whether you're doomed to a life o' misery or whether you're gonna be the happiest man on earth."

"That last ain't nothin' to joke about."

"Shore not. I never seen a fella about to git married who wasn't the happiest man on earth. An' sev'rul marriages must be takin' place at the same time in diff'runt places. Come back to the Partch brothers. Real trouble seems to be brewin'."

"An' you're lettin' me in on it, Mournful?"

"Lettin' you in. My gosh, I'm draggin' you in."

CHAPTER IX

Gathered Men

The two returned to the Partch brothers and Mournful said: "Speak your piece to Staves, Pete. He's all fer you."

"If you've tol' him, there ain't nothin' for me to add."

"I ain't said a word to him about your business."

"How do you know he's for me, then?"

"Oh, I was speakin' here an' there. Slam your stuff at him. If he don't b'l'eve you, I'll open him up with a coupla bullets."

"I ain't said so before, Mournful, but I say now that I wouldn't wanta have no gunfight with you," Staves said.

Pete Partch told Staves the story which he had previously told Mournful. Staves frowned, and Mournful thought he struck exactly the right note when he declared: "This thing includes every cowman in the country. Mournful, when'll you be back at Winfield's?"

"Some time after dark."

"Mind if me an' about ten men rides over there? You'll wanta talk to Danforth an' Long. I'd like to be in on it."

"I'll be lookin' for you," Mournful said.

He and the Partch brothers went on to Long's. Long greeted all three cordially and insisted that they remain for supper, after Partch had told his story again.

"You say Staves is givin' you ten men?" said Long.

"'Leven with himself," Mournful said.

"I'll give you 'leven then. You mind if I go with you over to see Danforth?"

"I couldn't bear to leave you behind," Mournful declared.

So Long and his eleven men and the brothers and Mournful arrived at the Winfield ranch toward nine o'clock. Danforth was just getting ready for bed, but he was in the yard in no time at all. Staves and his men stood apart till Mournful had repeated Partch's story. Then Mournful called up Staves, and the Staves and the Long men gathered together.

"Son," said Mournful to Johnny, "you better go over an' chew the fat with them punchers."

"You mean to say I ain't gonna be in on this thing?" Johnny demanded.

"Oh, shore you are! You're goin' wherever we go, an' them men your brother seen are gonna report back to their boss, if they got one, that you was with a bunch o' riders. That'll be fine news for the head man."

"But my gosh, you expect me to lay around home while you an' them punchers are fightin' for me an' my brother?"

"No; I don't expect you to lay around home. I expect you to stay right here at Winfield's for the present. You may be able to git inta this thing later on, but not now."

"I'll ride by myself, then."

"Boy, you do what Mournful Martin tells you to do," Danforth ordered. "You don't wanta stop him in whatever play he makes, do you?"

"I guess not," Johnny said. "But it don't seem right to me."

"I've known Mournful to be wrong a lotta times," Danforth admitted, "but this ain't one o' the times. I can tell by the expression on his face."

"Where's Winfield?" Mournful asked.

"Sulkin' in the house. I tol' him to stay there till I found out what was goin' on."

"Staves," Mournful said, "you go up an' knock on the door an' tell Winfield we wanta see him."

To Mournful, Staves seemed suddenly breathless. He gave Mournful an understanding look and slowly started for the door. Mournful knew that he recognized that Mournful was giving him an opportunity to see the girl he was interested in.

However, Winfield himself opened the door. For a few seconds Staves stood there, looking beyond him.

"Martin wants you," Staves then said.

George came out and approached the men. He fixed angry eyes on Mournful and said: "Thanks for givin' me the liberty o' movin' around on my own land."

"I ain't holdin' you in none," Mournful told him. "You c'n ride from here to yonder on your own land an' all the other land in this country. Why should I attempt to stop you? I want ten of your men. If you wanta be one o' the ten, it'll be all right with me."

"You're gonna stay here," Danforth asserted.

While Danforth had been a guest at this ranch, he and George had had many long talks about older days when George's father and Danforth had been close friends. Now George valued Danforth's opinion beyond that of any other man, his father being dead. His anger suddenly went out of him.

"All right, Mr. Danforth," he said.

Danforth jerked his head toward the house and said: "It's best, son. They's plenty men. Mournful wants ten o' yours. That'll be a good-sized contribution."

George went over to the bunk house and spoke to a number of his men. They drew a little apart, so that Mournful would know they were ready.

"I guess that's all, George," Mournful said.

As George started toward the door it was opened and Emily and Cora came out. They walked straight up to Danforth and each laid a hand on his arm.

"To bed, Mr. Danforth," Emily smiled.

"You're up too late as it is, Mr. Danforth," Cora added.

"I guess it's all yours, Mournful," Danforth said. "I can't call a minute of my time my own any more. I'm either eating or setting in the sun or bein' ordered off to bed."

"I wouldn't mind takin' some o' them orders my own self," Mournful said. "Just look at the two that is takin' time out to give you them orders."

The two girls led Danforth away. As the three entered the house, Mournful stole a look at Staves and then one at Johnny. Staves was staring at the door. Johnny was staring at the ground. Mournful guessed that he was so disappointed that he had paid no attention to Cora. Mournful was glad of that. Staves was the better man for Cora—if he left whisky alone.

"There won't be nothin' doin' till mornin'," Mournful told the punchers. "You better git all the sleep you c'n tonight. That's what I'm gonna do."

The punchers went into the bunk house. George invited Long and Staves to remain the night. Long said he would remain but Staves declared he must go on home. He told Mournful he would be back in the morning. George and Long went into the house and Mournful told the brothers to find bunks for themselves, the sleeping rooms in the house being limited.

"I'll expect you to be here in the mornin'," Mournful said.

"We'll be here," said Pete, but Johnny said nothing; and Mournful guessed that he, like George, was having a sullen moment.

Mournful and Staves were left alone.

"I don't b'l'eve you c'n tonight, Staves," said Mournful.

"Don't believe I can what?"

"See that girl tonight."

"The hell! That ain't what I'm waitin' for!"

"'Scuse me," said Mournful. "Well, if you must go home, you better start. You'll need some sleep. I'll be lookin' for you early in the mornin'."

"Couldn't you ask her to step out here for a minute?"

"I don't see how. What excuse would I have?"

"Not any, I reckon. Well!"

"You're hard hit, ain't you, Staves?"

"Mournful, I don't understand it. I've met lotsa girls in my time, but I ain't never met one like that girl."

Mournful was looking at the door, wishing that he could invent a reason for calling her out. It'd be a great thing if she would marry Staves. If Staves had anything in him—and Mournful believed he had—he would run straight, and Cora would know, for the first time in her life probably, what it meant to be cared for.

"Keep still a minute," Mournful said, for the door was being slowly opened.

Cora appeared in the doorway, her head turned, the

lamplight flowing over her. Mournful had a little shock. Cora seemed to be stealing out of the house. In her backward looking she was making sure that no one observed her.

Lamplight must have been in her eyes, because when she softly closed the door she stood on the step looking toward the bunk house. However, her eyes became accustomed to the night light quickly, because the moon was shining, and she saw Mournful and Staves. She hesitated. Then she called: "Mournful Martin."

"Yeh," Mournful said, and went quickly up to the door.

Cora stepped down and took his hand and led him along the house to the rear corner.

"You're goin' to ride, ain't you?" she asked. "You're goin' to fight?"

"I dunno about that last," said Mournful.

"Well"—Cora paused to take a long breath, then hastened on—"Mournful Martin, you're the finest man ever I met. You're the squarest man. I'll be waiting for you when you come back. I'll marry you if you want me to."

It was a good thing for Mournful Martin that he was not facing an enemy with a gun in his hand. Mournful was practically out on his feet. He was stunned and almost paralyzed.

"Huh?" he managed to say.

"Oh, you understand, Mournful."

"Phew," said Mournful, and began to take himself in hand.

"Don't you want to marry me, Mournful?" Cora asked.

"Hell, no! An' you don't wanta marry me. You think you owe me somep'n, an' you're tryin' to pay me back. How 'bout that Johnny boy?"

Cora took several deep breaths and her face cleared.

"I oughta give you a good spankin'," Mournful broke out. "You're crazy. Don't you never let your gratitood run away with you again. A girl like you has got a lotta things comin' to her. Here, you come over here an' I'll interduce you to a fella that's as crazy as you are, on'y he's crazy about you."

"Who is it, Mournful?"

"Staves. That fella that was in the barroom, raisin' Cain."

"He drinks. He's a gunman."

" Not no more. He's reformed."

" But, Mournful, men like him don't reform."

" You've seen too much o' the wrong kind o' men. This fella is all right. You come an' meet him."

Cora reluctantly followed him over to where Staves stood. Staves took off his hat and fixed his eyes on Cora's face. Mournful " interduced " them.

" Howdy, ma'am," Staves said.

Cora stood looking at him. The man was humble, courteous in his own way, a far different man from that man who had been in the barroom. Cora greeted him rather breathlessly. Then she turned and almost ran toward the door. She opened it, slammed it shut, seeming to forget the caution with which she had opened it.

" Well, you got a start," said Mournful.

" A hell of a start," said Staves gloomily.

" You'll have to take your time. She thinks you're a drunkard and a gunman."

" She'll find out ! "

" That's the idea."

Staves mounted his horse and got out of there. Night wind in his face would be good for him, Mournful told himself.

Mournful didn't feel sleepy. He guessed he'd have a cigarette. He wasn't worried by what lay before him. He had a good-sized bunch of men to work for him and he had a notion that they could take care of any outfit that might move into the country, to start raising hell.

And he was extremely gratified that everything was now all connected up. Staves would have to take his time with that girl, but if he played his cards right he might put his rope on her.

Johnny Partch was still something of a problem. Too bad there wasn't a nice girl around for him some place. That was what he needed. A girl who would keep him from trying to romp all over.

Mournful smoked two cigarettes and then he began to nod. He raised his arms and started a yawn. He stopped the yawn and dropped his arms.

Someone was coming out of the bunk house. Mournful remained as he was. Johnny appeared. As Johnny turned his head toward Mournful, the long man looked straight ahead of him. Johnny, he was aware, would look in all directions, and he gave him time to do it. He must have seen Mournful, but he did not speak. The

silence was unbroken. The long man let a full minute pass. Then he glanced in the direction of the bunk house door. Johnny was edging along the wall of the bunk house, trying to get to its end, so that he might disappear around it. The moonlight glinted on the dark barrel of his gun.

"Howdy, Johnny," Mournful said. "Goin' away? Quittin' us?"

"Put up your hands an' come here, Martin," Johnny ordered.

Mournful lifted his hands and walked up to the youngster.

"You can't take over my fight, Martin," Johnny declared. "I ain't that kind. I'm startin' out on my own. Don't try to stop me."

"Stop you? I wouldn't dream o' tryin' no such thing."

"The hell you wouldn't. I'll just take your gun."

"Help yourself."

Johnny hesitated and then he plucked out Mournful's gun. He said icily: "Come along with me till I get my horse."

"Not me! I ain't neither a hostler nor a wrangler. Git your own horse."

"Don't push me too far, Martin!"

"I ain't pushin' you none at all. I didn't have to put up my hands. I didn't have to come over here."

"Why didn't you? I had a gun on you."

"A gun you wouldn't dast use."

"Why wouldn't I?"

"Them punchers, them men in the house, ain't dead. They're on'y sleepin'. You couldn't shoot me an' git gear on your horse in time to make your getaway. But I ain't stoppin' you, boy. You jest go git your horse an' ride to hell outa here. Leave your near blind brother to worry about you. I'll send all them men home in the mornin' an' go about my peaceful ways."

Johnny evaded Mournful's eyes and Mournful reached down and took his gun. He promptly placed it in its holster.

"On your way, Johnny."

Johnny did not go on his way. Both he and Mournful lifted their heads. They heard the far, faint beat of a horse's hoofs.

"Mebbe we'll get some action, Mournful," said Johnny "Mebbe that's somebody comin' to start somethin'."

"Johnny, you ain't old enough to have good sense. If

you had good sense, you would know that no one rider was comin' here hell bent, to start anything. They's trouble some place, an' that fella is comin' to tell us about it."

"If there's trouble some place, I'm in on it," Johnny declared.

"If I say so. Keep still for a while."

The sound of the hoofbeats died, and Mournful knew that the rider had slowed his horse to a walk.

"He's comin' cautious," Johnny said.

"A horse can't keep to the pace he was hittin' for long," Mournful declared. "You'll hear him pick up his horse before long."

That proved true. The hoofbeats were nearer when the two men could hear them again. The horse was held to the killing pace till it was wheeled in toward the house. Then it was brought to a walk again.

The man on its back was Staves.

"Stay where you are, Johnny," Mournful ordered. "Staves wants to talk to me."

"You won't let me in on nothin', huh?"

"You mind what I tell you. Don't ac' like a little boy."

Catching sight of the two men, Staves stopped his horse the length of the bunk house from them. Mournful went along to him. Staves dismounted. He took off his hat and wiped away sweat. Then he looked at Mournful with a kind of plea in his eyes.

"Mournful," he said, "I've killed two men. I've really killed them this time. Just my damn luck. I get int'rusted in a girl an' I'm forced inta a killin'."

"Don't let that bother you," Mournful advised. "That girl has spunk. You had a right to kill them two."

"Thanks, Mournful," Staves said.

"Johnny, go inside an' rout out your brother."

Johnny's interest was so great that he obeyed. He seemed to think Mournful would tell him nothing, but would tell his brother everything.

Pete came out in a few minutes with Johnny behind him.

"Johnny," Mournful said as the two men came up, "go git two horses, one fer you an' one fer your brother."

"You mean it. Mournful?"

"I allus mean what I say. Besides, I gotta humour a boy that won't stay put."

"But, Mournful, I'll——"

"Git goin'! If I take you along with me, I'll at least know you ain't pullin' somep'n off that'll wreck ever'thing."

CHAPTER X

OUT OF IT

WHILE JOHNNY was gone for the horses, Staves related how he had killed the two men. He had seen them riding toward him but had thought nothing of it. Etiquette of the road demanded that he go on and meet them. A little way from him they stopped, but he continued till he was in front of them.

"They sprung the usual thing about bein' two punchers lookin' for jobs," Staves said. "That made me suspicious. I kep' close watch of them, an' I said to the one that spoke; 'Kinda funny to be looking for jobs at this time o' night. ain't it?" That one said that it's been so damn hot that they was takin' advantage o' the night. I tol' him I guessed he didn't find the night much cooler.

"The other fella made just one move. That was towards his gun. I flashed mine when the second one made a sim'lar move. They drew, an' I plugged the one an' covered the other. He musta been confused or thought I was, for he dragged his gun. What could I do but plug him?"

"Was they fast?" Pete asked.

"Well, they was some better'n fair."

"Your repertation was founded on somethin', then," said Pete.

"Oh, I ain't braggin' no more. I got enough o' that."

Pete turned to Mournful and said: "You think them two is the men I seen in town. You wants me to have a look."

"You're a good guesser," Mournful declared.

Johnny arrived with two horses. He was aboard one and led the other. Mournful smiled.

"Johnny," he said, "I don't doubt your nerve or anything else about you 'cept one thing."

"What's that?" the astonished Johnny asked.

"What in hell do you think I'm gonna ride?"

"Oh, gosh!" Johnny declared in disgust.

I give you a chance to ask me that question," Mournful relentlessly went on, "but you didn't think of it. You seen that Staves had a horse an' you went an' got one fer yourself an' one fer Pete, leavin' me afoot. I don't call that any kind o' headwork."

"I'm sorry, Mournful. I'll get a horse for you. Where's your saddle an' bridle?"

"Hangin' on the corral rail. I been tryin' to git over to you that you're untamed an' don't think quick an' fast. Yet you wanted to handle this business all by yourself."

Johnny dropped the reins of the led horse and rode back to the corral.

"Well," said Mournful, "I guess all the wild hombres is quieted down now. I reckon Johnny will begin to do some thinkin'."

"It's all he needs," Pete asserted. "An' he's got a good reason for bein' kinda wild. I'll tell you about it sometime, Mournful."

"You don't need never to tell me nothin'. We'll jest wait an' see where Johnny lands."

Johnny seemed to have lost his temper in his absence. His ups and downs astonished even Mournful. He said he didn't care what happened. He'd ride right into a herd of crooks.

Mournful saw that speech like this didn't get them anywhere. So he started his horse and the others came along behind. He decided he must let them come up to him. When they did, he said: "We'll git along now."

When, they reached the place where the bodies lay, Mournful and Pete dismounted. They walked up to the bodies. Pete knelt and peered down at them. Then, shaking his head, he rose and stated: "Them ain't the men. Far as I c'n make out, they ain't in Ferguson's employ."

"Who's Ferguson?" Mournful asked.

"Head of the outfit—or was head of it time I mixed with him."

"Tell us about him."

"Not much to tell. He lied about me."

"What-fer lookin' fella?" Mournful inquired.

Partch gave a description of Ferguson, which made it appear that Ferguson had a good-lookin' face an, a strong, compact body.

"He allus seemed to me like he could lick any man with a gun."

"You're sure none o' these men ain't the two you saw in town?"

"I'm positive. I'd know them two anywheres, dead or alive."

"Well," said Mournful, "they may be Ferguson men.

Anyhow, they're outa the way. . . . Staves, come an' take a look."

Staves examined the men as Pete had previously done. "I don't know 'em," he said. "That don't mean nothin' me bein' new here. They mighta got temp'ry jobs. If they was unused to the country, they might have found the weather too hot for them an' rode in the night. They mighta thought they'd arrive at some ranch house, just as the daybreak stir was beginnin'."

"You're leanin' over backwards now," said Mournful. "They was crooks."

The men prepared to depart, since there was no work for them here. Before they could get straightened out there was a burst of gunfire off to their left.

"Drop down fer a minute," Mournful ordered.

The men dropped down and became full length. The gunfire was repeated. Johnny Partch sprang up, but following a third burst he fell.

A fool again! One of the bullets had got Johnny. Mournful crawled over to him. He did not rebuke him.

"I couldn't lay there an' let them fellas sweep bullets around me," Johnny said. "Hell, if you're gonna fight, fight!"

"An' git knocked out?"

"My on'y hurt is in my laig."

"Let's have a look at it," Mournful said.

Johnny exposed a leg with a neat hole in it. It was a nasty looking wound.

"It ain't bleedin' as much as it should," Mournful said. "You c'n stand it till we git back to Winfields'?"

"I can stand it, but I'm outa everything from now on. I was a fool an' got what was comin' to me."

"Well, lay where you are," Mournful ordered.

He went close to the other men and told them about Johnny's injury.

"I tol' him he'd get somethin' outa his foolishness some day," Pete said. "It may be all for the best, however."

Mournful, too, thought it might be all for the best. Johnny might have to lie up for some time, how long depending upon how bad his hurt was.

"Them fellas was layin' down," Mournful said. "I didn't see nobody move out on the flat. I reckon we'll jest ride in on them."

"They'd knock us outa our saddles," said Staves.

"Oh, we won't go straight in."

They returned back along the road and there was no more gunfire. Mournful kept his eyes on the place where he had seen the flashes.

He was rewarded, for he saw half a dozen men rise from the flat and run toward the hills. Mournful followed their movements with keen eyes. Then he let his eyes drift on. Beyond the men were the shadowy shapes of horses. They would have some distance to travel before they reached those horses, giving Mournful and Staves an advantage.

"Pete, take your brother to Winfield's," Mournful said. "Tell Winfield I want him kep' there for a while."

Pete promised he would do that. He departed with Johnny at once, leaving Mournful and Staves alone.

"We better git goin'," Mournful said. "If we let them hombres git inta the hills, we may never find 'em. They ain't got to their horses yet."

The two started across the flat. They saw the men mount and start for the hills.

"Push in," Mournful told Staves.

They sent their horses along at top speed. Some of the other men must have been aware that the two would soon be within firing distance. They spurred their horses. The others lagged behind.

Mournful told Staves to fire when he did. He lifted his gun. There were twin reports and two of the riders fell. Mournful and Staves lifted themselves in their stirrups. The four remaining men were riding hard and fast.

Mournful and Staves pursued them and brought down two more men.

"Even up now," Mournful said. "Let's git them other two. We can't afford to let the head man git an inklin' o' what's happened."

Again they fired and those remaining men fell. Mournful said to Staves: "Take it easy. Them fellas may not be as bad hurt as they pertend."

They went in cautiously. At first nothing happened, but then gun flame came from among the fallen men. As Mournful had suspected, one at least of those riders still lived. Staves and Mournful, having refilled their guns, fired together, and immediately a man over there came to his feet. That he had been hit was indicated by the fact that he wavered instead of standing solidly. However, he was a fighter and he acted as if he were determined that the battle should not end till he had taken some toll.

He fired just once, however, and the echo was still in the air when he pitched forward.

"Game fella," Mournful observed. "'Nother good man gone wrong, I reckon."

They moved in on the men and found them all dead save one. When Mournful tried to question him, he merely twisted his lips, his eyes hot. There was no question about his gameness, but gameness could not enable him to carry on. He died while Mournful was trying to dig something out of him.

Mournful said: "We gotta bring Pete here from Winfield's."

They rode back to Winfield's and found Pete and Johnny there. Pete had not had Long or Danforth called, but one of the older punchers was taking care of Johnny's wound. He was doing it fairly well. Johnny must be suffering, for the puncher said that the bullet had gone clear through the leg, just missing the bone. At last, however, the job was done.

"Great fella, ain't I?" Johnny asked.

"Lotsa better men has been laid up," Mournful said.

"I'll have to ask you to keep me informed of what's goin' on, Mournful."

"Oh, we'll take care o' that. Pete, can you go back with Staves an' me an' see if you know any o' then riders?"

"Take care o' yourself, Mournful," said Johnny.

"My horse is right outside," Pete said. "Let's get goin' if we're goin' at all."

"Yeh, Well, Johnny, you better obey orders till your leg heals. I reckon you'll stay put fer a while."

Staves and Mournful went outside. They sat in their saddles for a while.

"I don't think them six come f'm town," said Mournful. "Whatcha think about it, Staves?"

"I think other men are holed up in the hills."

"I'm pretty sure they are. An' the place they're lookin' fer is Partch's new ranch. I think they found out—or some did—where Partch was. That brought 'em down here. They must know that Partch has cash on hand now, an' they're gonna rob him. Then they'll pay their respects to all this range."

"We better go to Partch's after we have a look at all them men."

Pete came out.

"Let's git along," Mournful said.

They rode back to where the two men were at the roadside, dead. Passing these, they went out to where the other bodies were. Partch moved from body to body. When he had finished with the last one, he stood up and said: "I don't know a man among them."

"I dunno," said Mournful, "whether it'd be best to go to town an' try to pick up somebody. You'd have to go with us, Partch. You know some o' the men an' we don't."

"The saloons would be closed at this time o' night," Staves objected. "I'm for goin' to Partch's first."

"We're on our way," said Mournful.

They returned to the road and went along it for a way. Then Mournful said to Partch: "You better go back to Winfield's."

"I s'pose. I understand that I couldn't be of no use to you anyways. Damn my eyes!"

To avoid anyone at the house Mournful and Staves rode across the flat and Partch continued to the Winfield ranch.

Day was coming along by the time Mournful and Staves arrived at the Partch ranch. They got into a safe position and watched the house for a while. No one appeared. Under the Partch ownership no men were employed. No Partch cows grazed along with the cows of other outfits.

At length Mournful said: "We ain't gittin' no place, settin' here. Let's go down in front of the house. I don't b'l'eve anybody's inside. . . . Well, wait a minute!"

"Smoke from the chimney!" Staves breathed.

"Neither o' the Partch brothers is in that house," Mournful said. "We know that. Who in hell is it?"

"Give it up. We better wait a bit. Whoever is in there is gonna show himself before long."

They remained where they were and presently the smoke died down and then disappeared altogether.

"Breakfast's over," Staves grinned. "I'd like to get to some o' that food. Mebbe I will."

They were on their feet and were about to start when someone emerged from the house.

It was not a man but a girl. She was carrying a pan, probably with the remnants of her breakfast in it.

She disposed of the pan's contents and turned back toward the house. As she did that, Mournful had a good view of her. Her hair, he saw, was brown and he supposed her eyes were so. Her stride was free and easy, indicating abundant strength and energy. Instead of going into the

house, she sat down on the step and cupped her chin in her hand.

"By gosh, she can set still!" Staves said.

"Niçe, ca'm girl," Mournful declared.

"But what in hell is she doin' here?" Staves demanded. "This ain't no place for a girl."

"T'ain't likely she knowed that," said Mournful. "Well, let's go down an' meet her an' greet her. Her place, I'm thinkin', is over at Winfield's."

"You think Winfield is openin' a home for young girls?" Staves asked.

"If you play your luck, you'll think Winfield done well, fer you, in takin' one girl in."

"Might be. Winfield looks like he'd give a man a chance."

"Right now that's the idea with him. Well, let's git down to where this girl is. We don't want her to find out accidental we're here."

"She might use a gun. I got a notion she ain't a afraid o' much. She ain't moved an eyelash, far as I can see, since she sat down there."

The two men started their horses toward the house. They were close to the girl before she seemed to hear them. Mournful was sure, however, that her ears had picked up the first sound. Mournful sat his horse in silence, and presently Staves followed his example.

At last the girl dropped her hand from her chin and turned her head, as if she were going to identify the riders. Instead, however, she widened her eyes, and they held a startled look. She came to her feet.

"Oh, I thought you two were the Partch brothers," she exclaimed.

"You know them boys?" Mournful asked.

"Well, yes. I was brought up with that poor fool, Johnny."

"Johnny ain't no poor fool," Mournful asserted. "He's a hurt boy."

"Who are you two?" she asked a little frigidly.

"Me, I'm Mournful Martin. This fella is named Staves. We're friends o' Johnny and Pete."

"You're a friend of Pete, are you? Well, that's a falsehood. Peter Partch don't make friends with anybody. Johnny will make friends with anybody. He's calm and cheerful all the time."

"He's been runnin' wild down here," Mournful stated. "I reckon he'll be good, now that you've come."

" Are you trying to be smart, Martin ? "

" No, ma'am ! It runs this way. Me, an' the cowman I work for is here visitin' at the Winfield ranch. Pete and Johnny is over at that ranch now."

" Why aren't they here ? "

" Some men is on the prod. We thought it would be good to have the Partch brothers where a bunch o' men was."

" What's the matter with Johnny ? "

" He got a bullet in his leg. Nothin' serious, but he'll be laid up for a while."

" Martin, you're a good guesser. Where is this Winfield ranch ? I knew the Partches had come to this country, but I had a dickens of a time finding this ranch. It's a heck of a ranch, ain't it ? "

" It ain't really a ranch," Mournful said. " The Partches are just livin' in it, doin' no business. If you like, me an' Staves here will take you to where Johnny is."

" I want to go there. I'm gunning for Johnny Partch."

" What's your interest in him, ma'am ? "

" You act as if you were a privileged character. You're a cowman, I suppose ? "

" Jest a puncher, ma'am," Staves put in. " But I tell you you can trust him all down the line. The squarest shooter ever was."

" I'm glad he's honest," the girl said. " He hasn't much of anything else."

" Thank you, ma'am," said Mournful. " I'd rather be honest than a good-looker. Well, where's your horse ? "

" In the stable. I've ridden him pretty nearly off his feet, but I guess he's good for a few more miles."

" Get yourself ready an' we'll turn up your horse."

" If you think I have any special interest in Johnny Partch, you're mistaken," she said.

" Ma'am, you got a name. What is it ? "

" You could be shot for putting that question," she said.

" Yes, ma'am. Go ahead an' shoot me."

" I'll be ready in a few minutes."

" I dunno if you'll be let meet Johnny," Mournful said.

" I'll see him. I'll bet I will ! Well, my name is Ina Harper. I'm from the north, where the Partch brothers lived before they came down here. Peter Partch's health isn't very good. He wanted sunshine and thin air."

" No," said Mournful, " it's Danforth that needed them things."

"Danforth? Who's Danforth?"

"My boss. Let's not fool along, ma'am. Pete tol' me all about himself."

"And about Johnny?"

"Not much about Johnny. Prison fer Pete, y' know."

The girl met frankness with frankness. She said, with a good deal of spirit and some anger: "I was engaged to Johnny. I'd known him all my life. The thing was settled. My father and my mother agreed and so did Peter. Then Johnny quit me."

"Oh, you c'n make up with him, ma'am. I been straightenin' out a lot o' people jest recent. I'll fix it so you'll have Johnny. If you say so, I'll hogtie him."

"Have Johnny," she sneered. "Take me to him. I'll wring his neck."

"Will you lemme see you do that, ma'am?" Mournful asked. "I——"

He did not finish that last sentence. A bullet whizzed past him and Staves.

"Git inta the house, ma'am," said Mournful.

"You two will have to come in before I stir a step."

"I'll say we'll come in. I dunno if it'll be safer. If I stay out here I'll be shot to death. If I go inside I'll have my neck wrung."

Another bullet took the course of the first. The girl hastened into the house and Mournful and Staves went right after her.

"We're trapped, aren't we?" Ina asked.

"That fella couldn't hit the side of a mountain," Mournful declared.

He dragged a chair into a corner and told the girl to sit in it.

"Sit and spin?" Ina asked. "Not me, mister! I can handle a gun."

She opened a drawer in the kitchen table and drew out a gun.

"I'll let you tell me what to do," she said.

"I'm tellin' you to keep outa the way o' any an' all bullets," Mournful said.

She flashed him a bright look.

"I'll back you up, Mournful Martin," she stated.

"I wouldn't want no better backin'. Listen! I think I heard a sound outside. Keep away from the doors an' the windows."

CHAPTER XI

Cowardice

Mournful himself did not keep away from the doors and the windows. First he asked Ina and Staves to stand between a window and the door through which they had just come.

"I may shoot myself out," he said. "If I do, one o' you hand me a gun and reload mine."

"You seem to want to handle everything," Ina objected.

"That's his way, ma'am," said Staves. "An' he gen'ally does what he sets out to do. I ain't never seen a man so careless about himself."

"Will you do as I say?" Mournful demanded.

Staves and Ina took the positions he had requested them to take.

"If this thing gets hot, I'm steppin'," Staves declared.

"I'll let you know when it gits hot," Mournful assured.

"Oh, shore! *You'll* let us know."

"There ain't nobody else here," Mournful pointed out.

He went up to Ina's side and looked obliquely toward the place from which he believed the shots had been fired. His instant guess was that they had been sped from the end of the bunk house. That end projected beyond the rear corner of the house. It was almost certain that a man or two or more men had come up behind the bunk house and had fired without taking aim. An ordinary gunman could have hit either Mournful or Staves from that distance—if he had taken aim.

Mournful then moved over to the still open door. He lay down and pointed his gun at the bunk house corner. No one appeared in the five minutes during which he waited.

He rose and said: "Them fellas ain't gonna waste no bullets. I'm goin' outside. I think I know where they are."

He went to a rear window and threw it up. Staves snapped: "You can't go out there alone, Mournful."

"You think you'd better go with me an' leave the girl here alone? You ain't usin' your head, Staves."

"He is so," Ina declared. "He should go with you. I can take care of myself, I tell you."

"You been disappointed in love," Mournful said. "That's a sad state for a young girl. Her mind is like a cyclone had blowed through it. You jest leave things to me for a few minutes, ma'am."

He waited for no more argument, but put a long leg over the window sill and drew the other after. He went along to the rear of the house. He could not see along the rear of the bunk house even from that point. Stooping a little, he went into the open.

No men were at the bunk house end, but three were fleeing across the flat. Mournful had a notion that they had been taken by surprise when they had seen the girl and two strange men in front of the door. They had fired to drive all three into the house, not knowing whether other men were there or not.

Mournful looked across the flat. He took two seconds to decide on the quality of the fugitive horses. Naturally the horses were being urged along at top speed, but that speed was not so great that overtaking them would be impossible.

Mournful ran to his horse and threw himself into the saddle. As he turned the corner of the bunk house he saw that Staves and Ina had come to the door. Staves yelled something at him, but Mournful could not make out the words. He was sure, however, that Staves was trying to order him to come back.

Mournful went around the corner of the bunk house and started in pursuit of the three riders. They were now about half a mile from him. He dug in his spurs and his horse leaped forward and went into a wild gallop.

The race went on for ten minutes. Then Mournful saw the three stop their horses and turn them. Mournful looked back. Staves and Ina were coming along on the way which Mournful had just come.

"Hell!" he exclaimed. "What'd Staves wanta let her ride fer? . . . Well, I expect he couldn't stop her outside o' tyin' her up."

His job, then, was to get those three men before the girl and Staves came up. Johnny presented an added reason why no harm should come to her. She wouldn't have ridden down here from her northern home, a long and dangerous ride, unless she still cared for Johnny. Mournful also understood why Johnny had been a "butter-in." He was merely a defiant young man, because he had lost his chance for happiness. Johnny was out of it now and

Mournful guessed, since he was down, he would become an easy victim of the girl. He would do what she told him to do. If Ina were killed, as she easily might be if she kept on, Johnny would be sunk.

So Mournful rode hard toward the three men. He kept careful watch of the decreasing distance. The three men seemed to be waiting for him to come closer. That was going to be tough for them, Mournful told himself, for he would fire the moment he became sure that a bullet would carry effectively. Those three men were cowards. They had fired their shots and then had fled.

Only a brief time was required to bring Mournful into a position from which he could fire with certainty of his bullet hitting the mark.

He stopped his horse, dragged his gun, and sent a bullet toward the three men. It was an excellent shot, for a man went to the ground. Mournful fired again but missed. The remaining two wheeled their horses about and tried to race away. Mournful followed.

He did not fire. Sooner or later those two would have to take a chance with him, because his horse was diminishing the distance rapidly. Mournful waited for one or both those men to turn. If they didn't turn soon, he would be almost up to them.

One man twisted his head about and saw how close Mournful was. He turned his head back and probably spoke to his companion, for both horses were circled. That gave Mournful the chance he wanted. While that movement was being made, neither of the men could fire.

Mournful knocked another man out of his saddle. The other man threw up his hands. Staves and Ina reached Mournful.

"Stay here," Mournful said. "I'll go along an' git that man."

"Stay here yourself," Staves said. "You've got two of them. Let me go in an' take up that other fella."

"Go ahead."

Staves rode toward the other man. He did not draw his gun as he did so. Mournful and Ina saw him reach the other man, saw him sweep out his gun, heard his shot. The man rolled out of his saddle as if he had been an inanimate thing which had come loose from ropes which had held it.

"Was you watchin' that other fella?" Mournful asked Ina. "I had my eyes on Staves."

"Yes," Ina answered. "He dropped his right hand."

"He didn't know Staves," Mournful said. "He would have had to be mighty fast to drop his hand an' get Staves. Well, I reckon we won't git no infermation outa them three."

"What information would you have tried to get?"

"You know about Pete bein' sent to prison?"

"Of course. I was at the trial."

"You know about the outfit that testified against him?"

"Certainly."

"You got the nerve to take a look at them dead men?"

"Of course!"

"It won't shock you?"

"Don't be silly, Martin. I've lived in cow country all my life."

"Come on, then."

Staves continued to sit his horse. When they reached him he said: "I meant to take this fella up for you, Mournful, but he went for his gun."

"It's all right. Miss Harper is gonna take a look at all three."

"Kind of a bad sight for you, ma'am," Staves said.

Ina dismounted and examined the features of all three men. Returning to her horse, she said to Mournful: "I know one of those men. He testified against Pete. I've never seen the others that I know of."

The three horses were some distance away. "We'll take 'em up," said Mournful. No use in lettin' good horse flesh get away from us."

"They ain't any too good," Staves said. "Not as good as your horse, anyhow."

"This is one o' Winfield's horses," Mournful said. "Johnny knows a good horse when he sees one."

"And that's about all he knows," Ina snapped.

"You know that ain't true, ma'am. Johnny knows a lotta things, on'y he's been off his feed since he's been down here."

"Perhaps he has another girl," Ina said.

"P'raps he ain't," Mournful smiled.

"Do you know he hasn't?"

"That's me."

"We better be gettin' back," Staves advised. "Them three may be overdue at whatever place they was goin' to."

They took up the three horses and started for Winfield's. They arrived there without having seen anyone.

On the way Mournful tried to soften Ina, though he had a notion that she was bluffing.

"You still love Johnny, don't you ma'am?"

"I've known you for perhaps an hour," she said. "That gives you the right to pry into my personal affairs?"

"I'm a good pryer," Mournful retorted.

"You're a good man," Ina said. "You have the habit of running things. It's come to such a pass with you that you think you have to lead in everything that happens."

"I'm a good leader."

"Oh, Martin, stop! You're only trying to raise my spirits and you can't do it."

"I got your number a little bit, too. You're mighty sensible. You don't quit if there's any chance left that things might come out right. You're gonna talk to Johnny quiet an' easy."

"Has he said anything about me to you?"

"Not a word. I was paralyzed when I seen you standin' in front of the house."

"I've got a notion to tell you everything, Martin."

"People gen'ally do."

"Oh, lord, will you stop that and come down to cases? Well, Johnny and I became engaged when I was only sixteen. He swore he'd stick to me till such time as I was growed up. Then he quit. I'll bet you'll say he was yellow."

"I'll say it now: he's yellow."

"He broke off the engagement when Pete was sent to prison. It was his pride, I guess. He said he wouldn't let me marry the brother of a convict. I told him that neither he nor I believed Pete guilty. Also I said I wasn't marrying Pete. I was marrying him. He gave me a long look and turned his horse.

"He said: 'Don't speak to me if we meet. I ain't comin' over here no more. Don't you come over to my place. We're through. Find a better man than me.'

"Avoidance of me became an obsession with him. A number of times he rode out of his way to escape meeting me. At last I gave up. I always pretended not to see him.

"Then he and Pete sold their ranch all of a sudden. They were gone before I knew anything about it. My father was one of their few friends, and Pete told him where he and Johnny were going. I started down here right away."

"It was a dangerous trip," Mournful said.

"Oh, I came almost all the way on the train. Two punchers came with me. I slipped away from them in town this morning."

"Did they know where you was headed?"

"Oh, yes. My father told them."

"They'll be out here soon."

"They might be at Winfield's now."

The two men were at Winfield's when these three arrived, Staves stopped to turn in the horses, and Mournful and Ina went on to the house. Danforth was again in the sun, but he said Long had gone home. Mournful explained about Ina.

Danforth only smiled at her and asked her if she wanted to see Pete. She said she did and Pete came out. He was close enough to Ina to make her out instantly. Mournful didn't know how Pete would act, but Pete soon showed him. He walked up to Ina and took one of her hands and held it.

"I'm glad you've come," he said. "Johnny needs you."

"I'd better see him," Ina said.

Pete led her into the house. He came out in a few minutes.

"Johnny will be safe now," he said. "Him an' Ina is gettin' along to an understandin'. I feel better. I was afraid I'd wrecked both their lives."

"You didn't do nothin'," Mournful declared. "Johnny on'y got a foolish notion."

"Damn it, Martin, how is it you figger things so well? I bet you straightened that girl out while you was bringin' her here."

"That," said Danforth, "is due to his long association with me. I've heard that line o' talk from Mournful so long that I'm gettin' the habit. I used to be as good as he was in my youth. I'm just beginnin' to see that. So why shouldn't I brag a little?"

Mournful understood that Danforth was trying to josh Pete along, to get some of the bitterness out of his mind. Pete managed to laugh.

"Now, look here, Partch," Danforth said, "have you had a good doctor look at your eyes?"

"No. I ain't seen no doctor."

"What happened to your eyes?"

"I reckon they just wore out while I was—er—shut up.

They put me to stitchin' shoes an' my eyes wasn't used to that."

"S'pose you go to Phoenix an' see what a good doctor can do for you?"

"I could do that now," Pete said. "I ain't had the courage to do it before. I was afraid that doc would say I'd soon be blind. If Johnny an' Ina is gonna get along, I can leave Johnny. I couldn't before. I'll start tomorrow."

"I'll send some men with you till you get outa this country," Danforth promised. "If you need some money——"

"I got plenty."

Emily came to the door and spoke Mournful's name. He went into the house.

"Johnny and his girl want to see you," Emily explained.

"Come along with me," Mournful requested.

"I think they want to see you alone."

"Where's Cora?"

"She's about somewhere."

"Has she met this other girl?"

"Not yet."

Mournful went into the room in which Johnny lay. Ina was sitting beside him. She leaned down and kissed him.

"Get out of here, Mournful Martin," she ordered. "What do you mean by intruding on a couple that have just become engaged?"

"What? Again?"

"Again."

"Ma'am, I'm shore glad to hear that. You two has been foolish. Don't be foolish no more."

"I was the foolish one," Johnny said.

"Before I leave, ma'am, I wanta tell you somep'n," said Mournful. "You've met Emily. They's another girl in this house, a girl I've took under my wing. When I first seen her, she was in a dance hall. She hadda do that kinda work because she couldn't git nothin' else. If you can't speak to her kind, don't speak to her at all. She's had plenty trouble, but she's still a nice girl. Least she will be pretty soon, when she gits over what has happened to her. You gonna be her friend?"

"Mournful," Ina said, "any friend of yours is a friend of mine."

"That won't do. You gotta take her for herself or leave her alone. I ain't gonna let her be cast down again if I can help it."

"I'll remember, Mournful," Ina promised. "Now will you get out of here?"

Mournful went outside. He looked around. Well, he would be damned! There was Cora an' Staves down by a corral, talkin' to each other fast an' furious. Staves seemed to be having no trouble in getting out what he wanted to say.

"Ever'thing's pretty fair, Mr. Danforth," Mournful said.

"For a single man, you certainly got big ideas about gettin' men an' women married off."

"The quicker the women I meets git married, the safer I'll be," Mournful declared. "They won't git no chance to pick on me. Well, Mr. Danforth, s'pose me an' some o' the punchers ride with Partch tomorrow? Somep'n might be turned up on that trip."

"How far would you go?"

"'Bout to Phoenix."

The eyes of the two men met. Mournful was confident that, while Danforth wanted Partch to get his eyes looked at, he was playing a hunch, too. He had dealt with outfits like Ferguson's in this country before.

"It's time for me to take a rest," said Danforth. "I'll be shut of you that long. Whistle on your fingers, Mournful. Mebbe you can make that girl with Staves hear, though I doubt it."

Mournful whistled on his fingers and Cora turned in his direction. She spoke to Staves and then hurried up to Mournful.

"I wasn't whistlin' at you, ma'am," Mournful said politely. "I was jest practisin'."

"I was coming," Cora said. "It's time for Mr. Danforth to rest."

"Long as you didn't forgit altogether, we won't give you no black mark. If I was you, however, I'd stay away f'm that fella Staves."

"He promised he wouldn't drink any more," Cora said. "I know he'll keep his word."

"One more point scored fer pity," Mournful smiled.

"Mournful Martin, that isn't so," Cora flashed.

"Glad to hear it."

"Come into the house, Mr. Danforth. I've never seen such a meddler as Martin is."

"I'm the best meddler in this here country," Mournful stated; and added: "or any other country."

Cora followed Danforth toward the house. Before she

closed the door, she turned and smiled at Mournful.

Staves came up to him. He said: "Mournful, I do b'l'eve that I made some headway."

"Don't bother me," said Mournful. "If I don't git a coupla smokes right away, I'm gonna cash in. Besides, I ain't int'rusted none in what is goin' on round here."

CHAPTER XII

Six of Them

Mournful, Partch, and the thirty men assigned to Mournful set out for Phoenix before daylight, next morning. So far as Mournful could make out, they rode through peaceful country. They arrived at midnight, and camped outside the town. When they thought the place would be astir, they rode in. The men went to a stable and except for Mournful and Partch remained there.

The horses were tired enough and had to be fed. Mournful and Partch went around the town but did not find a doctor's office. They stopped in at a saloon, had a drink, and got the necessary information from a bartender.

The doctor examined Partch's eyes and had him read from a card. He took Partch into a dark room, then. When the two came out the doctor told Partch: "Your sight is dimmed. That's the best way to tell you. You should have glasses."

"I ain't goin' blind, then?"

"Oh, no. You're no nearer blindness than many other men and women."

"Could I see good with them glasses?"

"As well as you ever did."

"How soon can you have 'em ready, Doc?" Partch asked.

"You don't live near here?"

"Way to the south."

"Come in about six o'clock. I'll try to get the job done."

"Mournful," said Partch in the street, "that calls for a coupla drinks. Come on. I feel like fillin' my hide."

"That'd be a fine thing to do at this stage of the game."

"Oh, I won't get drunk. I know better than that, but you don't know what a load has been lifted from my mind."

"I c'n understand that," Mournful said.

They went into the first saloon they came to and ordered drinks. Mournful saw that half a dozen men who looked like punchers were at the bar. They gave Mournful and Partch quick glances. Partch could not look at them without peering, so kept his eyes on his glass.

When he and Mournful went outside, Mournful said: " You seen them men. Reco'nize any of them ? "

" I couldn't make them out plain enough. I don't think they're any o' the men that framed me."

" In a case like this you don't make up your mind to nothin'." Mournful said. " You gotta suspect every man you see."

They returned to the stable and Mournful told the punchers about the one incident. The punchers grew serious. They advised going to the saloon and protecting Partch while he looked the men over by getting close to some of them.

Mournful was against that. He said Partch's peering would make those punchers suspicious, even if they didn't know who Partch was but were in Ferguson's employ. Everything, Mournful declared, must be done naturally. He explained about Partch's glasses. The men agreed to wait. By sixes they went out to get a couple of drinks apiece and to eat. That was one of the longest days Mournful had ever spent, but the time to get the glasses eventually arrived. Mournful and Partch went to the doctor's office and Partch tried on the glasses.

" My Gawd," he exclaimed, " I can see as well as ever ! "

" Take it easy with your eyes," the doctor said. " Don't do any close work."

Partch paled, but he managed to mumble that he would do no close work.

" Let's drop in at that saloon an' see if them fellas are there," Partch urged. " I can size 'em up 'thout them knowin' it now."

" We'll go an' get a few men," Mournful said. " No use in us two goin' up against three times two."

" You know when to be careful an' when to fight, Mournful," Partch said.

" I'm still alive," Mournful pointed out.

Mournful asked five men in the stable to accompany him and Partch. If the number of those punchers was six, he would have an extra man. They went to the saloon and entered. It was a small place, serving drinks but no food. Only one puncher was at the bar now.

Partch looked at him and whispered to Mournful: "One o' the fellas that testified against me."

The men lined up at the bar and drank. The lone puncher had had a drink in front of him and he swallowed it hastily. Then he started to leave.

"Wait a minute," Mournful ordered.

Instead of waiting, the man broke for the door. The last man in the line of punchers drew his gun. He was far enough along so that the puncher could see his action. The puncher stopped.

"Outside, boys," Mournful said. "Bring him along."

Mournful and Partch went outside and the punchers brought the man out there. Partch confronted him.

"You're the lyin' pup that swore I was a rustler," Partch flamed. "Don't lie! We've got some o' your outfit already, an' we're gonna get the rest."

"Who the hell are you?" the man demanded. "I don't know you. I don't know nobody that wears specs."

"Move along to the edge of the town," Partch ordered.

"I won't! You can't make me!"

"We'll drag you."

"There's a sheriff here," the man stated. "You better not get inta no row with him."

"Go along," Mournful ordered. "We'll take you to where no sheriff will find you."

Partch looked cautiously along the street in both directions. Then he drew his gun, of some use to him now that he could see, and pushed it into the man's stomach. He took the man's gun.

"Move lively ahead o' me," he ordered.

The man could do no less. The punchers had not ridden here, because they did not want their horses to attract attention in front of the saloon if any of those six men should come along. So they had to walk and they were in an ugly humour when they got clear of the buildings and out on the flat.

"You can handle this fella, can't you?" Mournful asked Partch.

"I'd say so! I'd just as leave blow the hell outa him as not. I'll do it if he makes one move."

"Back we go, boys," Mournful said.

They returned to the saloon. No horses were in front of it, but Mournful knew that those men might have come to the same conclusion as he had come to.

Leaving the men where they were he went up to the

swinging doors and looked inside. No one was in the saloon now. Returning outside, Mournful led the men across the street. The moon was not yet up and they were lost in the darkness.

They had to wait only fifteen minutes before five punchers rode up and went inside. Mournful did not know how the punchers would act when they found that their buddy had gone. It was unquestionable that he was to meet them there. Then Mournful decided that they would wait a while for his return.

"Son," he said to a young puncher from Long's ranch, "go steal yourself a horse. Ride to that stable an' tell all the boys to come here, bringin' the rest of the horses Don't ride fast. We don't wanta git mixed up with what law there is. If them fellas come outa the saloon, we'll take care of you."

The young puncher crossed the street and untied the reins of a horse from the rack. He mounted quickly and started the horse quietly. He was soon out of Mournful's sight.

None of the other punchers had come out of the saloon. Mournful believed that the bartender knew when to hold his gun. If he had informed those punchers of what he had seen, they would have piled out of the saloon in a hurry.

Mournful waited till his riders, leading the other horses, came into view. They were walking their horses.

"Here we go," Mournful said. "We gotta git in there fast."

They crossed the street and by twos broke into the saloon. They had the men at the bar covered before they came out of their astonishment sufficiently to go for their guns. Then it was too late.

"Inta the street," Mournful ordered.

"What in the——" one of the men began.

"Get goin'!"

Those men stared at Mournful. His tall body was bent forward a little and his eyes glowed. After he spoke his mouth went tight.

"Killer!" one of the men breathed.

One man suddenly started for the door, but Mournful stopped him for a few seconds. Mournful said: "Don't you think you c'n get away. There's a bunch o' men outside that'll riddle you."

The five men passed through the door and Mournful's

men followed them. Mournful waited long enough to toss a five dollar bill on the bar and put his finger to his lips.

The bartender quickly took up the bill and nodded. When Mournful went into the street he found the captured men lined up and disarmed.

"Where's your horses?" Mournful asked.

"'Bout a block from here, behind a hotel."

"Hop up on any o' these horses," Mournful ordered. "Walk them to that stable. Ten men'll be behind you."

The other riders remained where they were and Mournful and nine men fell in behind the now mounted men. They came to the stable and Mournful ordered the hostler to bring out the men's horses.

"Don't you do it," one of the men suddenly cried. "Get outa here an' notify the sheriff that the damn town is bein' held up."

The hostler stared while Mournful walked up to the hostler. He said: "Don't pay no attention to what them fellas say." And he handed another five-dollar bill to the hostler.

"I ain't see nothin'," the hostler said.

Mournful made the men lead their horses outside. Then all the men went into their saddles, the prisoners with an alacrity which spoke of fear.

Mournful's men rode ahead of the prisoners, beside them, and in the rear. They soon came to the edge of the town and found everything as it had been. Then the whole party rode out into the sands of the surrounding desert. The night was as hot almost as the day had been. Mournful kept them going till they were twenty miles from the town.

"This'll do," he said, and all the riders stopped.

All about there was nothing but the sand. The moon was up now, and the sand glistened.

"Well, Partch," Mournful said.

Partch took off his glasses and looked through the lenses. He said: "The doc tol' me these glasses might mist over. He gimme a cloth to clean 'em. They ain't misted none."

"They won't mist in this climate," Mournful said. "There ain't enough moisture in the air."

"I'm ready then. I'll take that fella that swore me into prison."

"You think you c'n handle him?"

"I know it! I've dreamed o' meetin' him an' thought about meetin' him. I'm gonna kill him right here."

"Partch, you got the wrong man," that fellow declared.

"I never even heard your name before. I ain't never seen you."

Partch dismounted and told the man to do so. The man said he wouldn't do it.

"Somebody drag him from his horse," Partch said.

One of Mournful's men took up his rope, but the challenged man slipped to the ground.

"You arrange it, Mournful," Partch said.

"You better stand off twenty paces an' somebody will fire a gun. You c'n get goin' soon's you hear the report.

"I can't fight Partch," the man wailed. "He's too good for me."

"How do you know that? You ain't never see him."

"I guess he stands convicted, don't he, Mournful?" Partch asked.

"There ain't no question about him. Walk along twenty paces, fella. Don't try anything. I'll have a gun on you."

"I ain't got no gun," the man snarled.

"Whoever has got his gun give it to him," Mournful ordered.

"I don't know if this is his," said one of Mournful's men, "but I think it is. Partch gimme the gun an' I took another from somebody else. This gun is loaded, anyway."

The puncher walked up to the prisoner and held the gun out to him. The prisoner snatched at it and wheeled toward Mournful. His action seemed to indicate that he believed if he could get rid of Mournful he might have a better chance. It was a wild idea, but the man was wild. Before he could get his gun on Mournful, Partch shot him down.

"He was gonna try to kill you, Mournful," Partch apologized.

"It was your privilege to shoot him," Mournful said. "You don't owe no 'pology to nobody."

"Well, let's decide about these other fellas," said one of Mournful's men.

Mournful ran his eyes over the five. There really seemed to be no choice. Three of the men were tall; the two others were small. That, Mournful was aware, made no difference in their ability to stand hunger and thirst.

"I reckon I'll take this fella," Mournful said.

"Whatcha gonna do with me?" one of the tall men asked.

"I'm gonna make you ride in this sand till your tongue hangs out. Then mebbe you'll talk."

"You ain't asked me a question," the man objected. "Whatcha wanta know?"

"I wanta know where Ferguson is."

"He ain't got down here yet. I swear that's the truth. He'll be in your town in two-three days."

"What's he comin' here for?"

"To find a man named Partch. He says he's got a bunch o' money. Ferguson is gonna take his money an' then use him to help clean up the country."

"What was you fellas doin' here?"

"Lookin' over the town, finding out as much as we could. I'll tell you somethin' more. A Ferguson outfit is hangin' out down in Tucson, gettin' the lay o' the land. Ferguson will send somebody to Yuma, too. You men can bag each outfit if you move lively."

"How long you been workin' for Ferguson?" Mournful asked.

"Oh, a long time."

"Six—seven years?"

"Yeh, or more."

"They must have been in your country, Partch. They're as guilty as that fella you shot. Whatcha want done with 'em?"

"There ain't no place to hole 'em up?" Partch said. "We can't set 'em free."

"Well, let's get rid of them," a Mournful man snapped. "Hell, they're a bunch o' common rustlers. Horse thieves, too, prob'ly."

"Git goin', you fellas," Mournful told the prisoners. "Some o' you boys folla them. Come back alone."

"Well," said Partch, when the men had left, "that's gettin' rid of another bunch. You goin' to Tucson, Mournful?"

"You bet! We better get some food goin' around. It'll have to be et cold."

"Tucson ain't no big place," said a puncher. "We can stand it on its ear if we wanta."

"The main thing is to line up them fellas," Mournful said. "Ferguson ain't gonna have the help he expected."

"We ain't gonna be able to meet Ferguson when he hits our country," that puncher pointed out.

"We'll meet him sooner or later," Mournful said cheerfully.

CHAPTER XIII

Lame Horse

They neared Tucson about nine o'clock in the morning of the second day. They were a weary lot, for they had ridden through desert country a good part of the time. Occasionally they came upon water, and that saved them and the horses from complete exhaustion.

Mountains were now to their left and they started toward them, to get out of the sun's glare. They had ridden no more than a quarter of a mile when five riders dashed out of a draw. They had come out fast, but the sand slowed their horses. Catching sight of Mournful and his men, they turned toward the south. Immediately a dozen or so more men appeared, apparently in pursuit of the first men.

Mournful didn't know what to do. The fleeing men might be those for whom he was looking. The pursuers might be them. Therefore Mournful called a halt. The pursuers immediately opened fire. The fleeing men were bent low in their saddles and none was hit. Mournful yelled to the pursuers and they looked around. Mournful threw up both hands.

Now it seemed that the pursuers did not know what to do. They stopped their horses after futilely firing once more.

"Stay here," Mournful ordered. "I'll ride in an' see who them fellas is."

"We'll all go," a puncher said.

"Them fellas may be the men we're lookin' for. If they are they'll fire. They may be men from this country. That'll make it as dangerous as the other way round."

"If they're the fellas we're lookin' for, they'll kill you, Mournful."

"Not with all you fellas settin' out here. They'll jest lie. You leave this to me."

Still with his hands hoisted he rode toward the stopped men. The others were now some distance out on the flat.

"I'm from the Winfield ranch," Mournful said when he reached the riders. "I'm lookin' for a bunch o' men

that is tryin' to make trouble over our way. I'll have to ask who you fellas are."

"I'm a cowman," said one. "These boys work for me. One o' them fellas stole a horse from us up in the mountains. We had our horses in a rope corral, an' he sneaked one out. We seen them from above an' the fella that stole the horse left his. When we got down we found that horse had gone lame. We don't allow no horse stealin'."

"Where's the lame horse?"

"It can hardly walk. One o' my men hadda be left behind, for he had on'y that lame horse."

"They's hills over yonder. You can just make them out. If you're with the Winfield outfit, you oughta know about them hills."

"Yeh, I do know about 'em, but I ain't been in this country for long this time, an' I forgot, I come down here with a man named Danforth."

"Don't know him."

"Him an' me used to live down here, though we wasn't acquainted with each other at thet time. If you'll jest leave this business to me an' my men we'll clean up on them riders."

"How do I know you ain't hooked up with them?"

"If we was hooked up with them, we wouldn't have let you get away with firin' at them, would we?" Mournful asked.

"You mighta wanted to let them escape."

"You c'n see how many men I got. They wouldn't have needed to escape."

"There's somethin' to that. Well, bring your men up here. If you're hooked up with that other outfit there ain't nothing we can do, an' we might as well have a show-down now as later."

Mournful signalled to the men to ride in. When they arrived, one of them spoke to the cowman.

"I thought you went away when you quit workin' for me," the cowman said.

"Oh, I rolled around for a while, here an' there, an' then I come back. Long wanted a man, so I hooked up with Long."

"I thought you hooked up with Winfield," the cowman told Mournful.

"I got some men from Long's, some from Staves's—he's bought the Porter ranch—an' some from Winfield's. Them

men you run outa the mountains is a few of a gang headed by a fella named Ferguson. We got rid of sev'rul over near Phoenix. You gonna let them fellas escape ? "

"Let's get after them."

They started their horses. The other riders were a mile away by now, and these men could make no faster time than they had made. The mile of separation still existed when the fugitives disappeared into the hills. These riders kept on for another half mile. Then they stopped.

"You goin' inta the hills, Mournful ? " Partch asked.

"Are you Mournful Martin ? " the cowman asked.

"That's me."

"Why the hell didn't you say so ? I heard about what you done when ol' Winfield was murdered."

"Them fellas know they got a good start," Mournful said. "I think they'll keep right on goin'. They may go to Tucson. They may think they'll be safe there."

"We can go straight down to Tucson from here," the cowman said.

"You don't need to go. You was workin' in the mountains, wasn't you ? "

"I been missin' some cows," the man said.

"By gosh, mebbe them fellas has started operations already," said Mournful. "It don't seem possible that they'd do it on their own hook, before Ferguson got here, but you never can tell what a bunch o' crooks will do."

"I'm goin' to Tucson with you," the cowman declared. "Boys, you can go back an' go to work. I don't think there'll be anybody to bother you."

"I gotta right to go along," said a puncher. "That horse that was stole was my horse."

"Oh, well, you can all come," the cowman relented. "I reckon you got a right to be in on it too."

They rode down to Tucson, and Mournful said: "Far as we know there was on'y five of them fellas. We don't all need to ride in. Partch, you stay here with the men. I'll take acoupla men an' this fella c'n take a couple. That'll give us six. Plenty ! "

The other men remained where they were, and Mournful and the five others rode into the town. They came up behind a saloon and dismounted. Afoot they went out into the main street. No one was in front of this first saloon and they went along. They passed no more than five buildings when they saw a puncher leaning back against the front of another saloon. He had his hat drawn

over his eyes, and Mournful knew that he was surveying the scene in all directions. He had been looking away from Mournful and the other men as they approached, but in a moment he turned his head. Catching sight of the advancing men, he straightened up. Then he dropped back to his former lazy position.

"He was goin' inta that place," Mournful said, "but he changed his mind. He was afraid he'd give himself away. When we get up to him, mister, you jest say 'No' if he ain't a man you're acquainted with. If you are acquainted with him, speak to him. Then we'll know what to do."

They approached the man and stopped in front of him. The cowman said "No," emphatically. The puncher, and he was a puncher only in dress, Mournful was sure, pushed back his hat with the flat of his hand. He looked at the six men uneasily.

Mournful looked up and down the street. Few persons were abroad, and none was near. Mournful drew his gun, held it against his hip, pointed at the man's stomach. The cowman stepped up to him briskly on one side and took his gun.

"What in hell you think you're doin'?" the man demanded.

"Holdin' you up," Mournful said. "Where's your side-kickers?"

"I'm alone."

"Where's your horse?"

"He's bein' taken care of. I just got in."

"How far did you ride?"

"Quite a ways."

"You just got in an' you ain't had a drink nor your breakfast, huh?"

"Aw, go to hell. I don't have to tell you nothin'."

"One o' you boys take him back to where the men is," Mournful ordered. "Tell the men he ain't got no use for us nor us fer him." He looked at the man coldly. "They's some thirty men back yonder," he added.

"Thirty!"

"You heard me, an' Pete Partch is one o' them."

"Don't send me back there."

"Come clean then," said Mournful. "You was with the men that run outa the mountains after stealin' a horse."

"An' you know," the cowman said, "what happens to horse thiefs."

"The rest o' the men is inside," the man yielded. "The horses is behind the saloon. Them fellas may go out the back way if they think anything is happenin' out here. You better not fire a shot."

"I dunno why we should," Mournful said. "Whatcha know about this saloon? Is there a back room?"

"I dunno. I ain't been inside."

"You're a liar! You been hangin' around the town for quite a while. It's been your headquarters."

"Well, there's a back room."

"Them fellas went in there to eat, didn't they?"

"Yeh."

"An' one o' them was comin' out to let you eat while he watched."

"You're a good guesser, fella."

"Move along a little ways, boys," Mournful said. "Fella, don't stir from where you are. When that fella comes out, don't you go in. Speak a few words to him. I'll have a gun on you all the time."

"Either way I lose," the man said. "You'll kill me if I don't do what you say. They'll kill me if I do."

"We didn't git you inta this," Mournful pointed out.

He and the men moved along to the corner of the saloon. The man stood beyond the door away from them. The men had to wait for fifteen minutes. Mournful began to think they had seen what had happened here and the relief man was not coming out. He looked along the side of the building, but he could see no one and there was no stir back there.

Only another moment passed. There was then the sound of the door being opened. Mournful stood in front of the other men, his gun ready. Another man dressed like a puncher appeared. He immediately turned toward the first man.

"You can go in an' eat," he said. "Seen anything?"

The first man did not answer. Since he was facing the second man, he was also facing in Mournful's direction. Mournful saw that he was staring at the second man with wide eyes. His fear, Mournful guessed, was that this second man might wheel on him and shoot him when he turned in the other direction and saw Mournful and his men.

"What's the matter with you?" the second man demanded.

The first man lifted his head a little and looked at Mournful. The first man could not miss the significance

of that. He wheeled, his hand going to his gun butt. Two of Mournful's men stepped out, and the man found their guns on him, in addition to Mournful's.

"Drag it," Mournful said icily. "If you do, I'll put a bullet right through you."

The man's dark eyes blazed, but he could not maintain that anger. The fire died, the eyes becoming dull.

"Up with 'em," Mournful ordered.

The man raised his hands. Mournful went to him and took his gun. He said to the cowman: "Keep 'em here beside you for a minute. Watch the door."

He went swiftly along the side of the saloon and looked around the corner. Five weary horses stood there. They were dusty and they had been sweating recently. Mournful returned to the other men. He said to the second man: "Step along here with me."

"Whatcha gonna do to me?"

"Come on!"

Mournful backed along the building, the man following. A few feet from the street Mournful stopped and beckoned the man up to him.

"Where are them other three?" he asked.

"What other three?"

"I don't wanta chance a shot right here in town," Mournful retorted, "but I can crack your head open with a gun bar'l. Where's them other three that rode outa the mountains a while back?"

"I don't——"

Mournful raised the man's own gun, and the man quickly said: "They're in the back room. They've had some drinks an' et their breakfasts."

"Where was you all headed when you stole that horse?"

"Up to Phoenix to meet some men."

"Then where was you goin'?"

"To another town."

"You was gonna meet, Ferguson, huh?"

"Fer——"

Mournful raised the gun a little higher and declared: "If you stall any more, down comes this bar'l."

"We was gonna pick up them men an' meet Ferguson."

"An' Ferguson was gonna meet Partch some place an' take his money?"

"He said he thought there was better'n a hundred thousand in it."

"But it wasn't gonna stop with robbin' Partch?"

"He never stops with one haul."

"Them men in the back room is wearin' guns, huh?"

"O' course."

Mournful forced the man back to where the others were. He explained the situation.

"Two o' you stay here an' watch these fellas," he said. "Four o' us will go in an' have a drink. I feel the need of a drink."

The cowman nodded and Mournful took three men into the saloon with him. No one was at the bar and the bartender was going through the movements of polishing glasses. The four ordered drinks. When they had drunk them, Mournful leaned to the bartender.

"You c'n do us a little favour," Mournful said.

"Huh?"

"You can open the door of that back room an' ask the three gents in there whether they want anything more."

"I got orders to bring a breakfast in there for a man that's comin' in," the bartender said.

"All right. So much the better. Open the door when I tell you to, and then ask them fellas if you'll serve that breakfast now. Then hop back quick before they answer."

"I don't like the looks o' them fellas. They come in here all excited an' asked for the back room after they'd had four drinks apiece."

"Do what I tell you," said Mournful.

The bartender moved towards the door. Mournful and the other men moved more rapidly and two stood on one side of the door and two on the other side. The bartender opened the door.

"Gents, you want that meal served now?" he asked.

"That fella come in?" one of the men in the room asked.

The bartender leaped back and Mournful leaped forward. The man who had been standing beside him came up to his elbow, and the two others stood behind. The three men were seated at a table, their guns out of sight.

"Up with 'em, you hellions," Mournful ordered. "Otherwise we'll blow you to hell."

The hands of all three men had been above the table and they had no chance to go for their guns. They raised their hands. Mournful and his men moved into the room, cautioning the bartender to say nothing if any one should enter the bar.

"What's this all about?" one of the held-up men asked.

"Oh, we jest want you fer a little matter o' horse stealin'," Mournful answered. "We'll take you outside an' you c'n hop them tired horses you almost rode to death. We got some men near here that'll decide what's to be done with you."

"We ain't done no horse stealin'."

"Oh, shut up. We know you're Ferguson men."

"Has Ferguson been caught?" the man asked.

"Oh, you damn fool!" one of the other men cried. "Why couldn't you keep still?"

"Stand up," Mournful ordered.

The men rose and were deprived of their guns, which were laid on the table. Mournful put the extra gun he had there also.

He sent the men out the back door, so that if anyone had come into the bar, they would not see that a hold-up was in progress.

Mournful glanced along the side of the saloon. He should have been able to see the two other men with their prisoners, but they were not in sight.

Mournful became suspicious. He looked over his shoulder. Six men had come around the corner and were holding guns on Mournful and his men. One of the three prisoners must have followed Mournful's gaze, for he suddenly dropped to the ground. The two other men followed suit.

Mournful and his men were held up. They could not wheel and fire. The advantage was all with the six men.

CHAPTER XIV

INTENDED RAID

"WE MIGHT AS WELL put 'em up, boys," Mournful said cheerfully, for he believed he might as well be cheerful as cast down. "We're held up now, but we won't be for long. These men have made a terrible mistake."

All the men put up their hands and were dispossessed of their guns. Mournful turned about and looked at the man who had spoken. Well, he didn't seem to be as tough a hombre as some Mournful had met. He was dusty and his eyes were very weary, but he grinned as those eyes met Mournful's. Mournful let his slight smile come to his lips.

"I hope we've made a mistake," the man said, "but I don't think so." He addressed one of the captured men: "What was the tall fella doin' to you?"

"Why, we had et our breakfasts and was waitin' for a lookout to come in. This fella an' the other three come instead an' got the drop on us."

"You thought because you was in a room with the door shut, you was safe," the other jeered. "A shut door ain't so good. A enemy as well as a friend can throw it open." He turned to Mournful. "Who tol' you where these three was?"

Mournful was silent, and the man went on: "Won't tell us, huh? Well, that shore is a mark in your favour. There ain't nothin' that sets a man apart so much as stickin' by his friends. Go along inta that back room, all o' you."

Mournful and his men started for the door together. The cheerful one laughed and said: "Not all together. One by one an' one o' my men will be right behind you."

Mournful suddenly remembered the guns which had been laid on the table. If he could get into that room he might be able to pick up two of those guns. A few of these men would never steal a horse or hold up a man again. But what occurred to him could occur to one of the men who had originally been in the room—and did so occur.

"Wait!" that man cried. "Our guns is in that room."

The cheerful one's mood changed swiftly. He snarled: "You thought o' that almost too late. Damn your hides, you've bungled the hull business."

"We didn't bungle the business about the marshal."

"Hold your tongue!"

"You fellas was plannin' a raid on this town, huh?" Mournful asked. "You got rid o' the marshal?"

"Send your men inta that room, one by one," the man ordered.

One of Mournful's men stepped forward. One of the others followed him, a gun on him. Presently Mournful alone was outside. The apparent leader of the outfit walked up to Mournful and put a gun in his back.

"In you go," he said.

They were all soon in the room. It was small and they had to range themselves along the wall. The leader stood in the centre of the room, near the table.

"Take up your guns," he ordered the men who had been held up.

All the men were thus armed, save Mournful and his three.

"How's things in Yuma ?" Mournful asked.

That cheerful one had plenty of nerve, Mournful had seen, but now he started and stared at Mournful.

"In Yuma ?" he asked.

"Yeh. Did you raid the town ?"

"You're crazy. We ain't been in Yuma."

"Are you Ferguson ?" Mournful persisted.

"No, I ain't Ferguson. I don't know no such person. Quit askin' questions. Tell me who you are an' how you come to mix in this affair."

"I'm jest a cowpuncher f'm Oregon."

"You know Partch, do you ?" another man asked.

The cheerful one flew into a rage. He cursed the questioner and added: "You never did have no sense. You never will have any."

"That's all I wanted to know," said Mournful. "You fellas jest come from Yuma. What you pulled off there, I dunno. You come here to raid this town. I expect you murdered the marshal, so you'd have clear sailin', far as the law was concerned."

"You know a lot, don't you. Where did you get your information ?"

"Find out for yourself."

The man slowly walked up to Mournful and raised his gun. The man said: "Mebbe I can't break you but I can crack your skull. Then I'll break one o' these here others. It don't make no diff'runce to me."

"I'll tell you what happened," a Mournful man put in.

"You don't need to," Mournful smiled. "I'm gonna tell him. I jest wanted to see how tough he was. I ain't aimin' to git a dent in my head. Such dents is dangerous, I been told."

The man went back to the table and sat on the edge of it. He was cheerful again.

"Who are you ?" he asked.

"They call me Mournful Martin."

"Good name for you. I wish I had about twenty men like you. I'd sweep this country, Ferguson or no Ferguson."

"You're workin' for Ferguson," Mournful said. "I think a fella like you would be on his own."

"It takes time, fella," the man said, but Mournful saw that he was flattered.

" You quittin' Ferguson ?" asked one of the men who had been rescued.

The man regarded him with critical, unsmiling eyes. Then he went back to Mournful, without answering the question.

" Who pays you ? " he asked Mournful.

" The man I work for. His name is Danforth."

" Has he got a gang workin' this country ? "

" No. He's jest takin' a rest down here. He's a hones' cowman."

" You mean to say you go round raisin' hell 'thout gettin' nothin' outa it but puncher's wages ? "

" My wants is small," Mournful said.

" There's somethin' funny about all this. You tell me what's happened."

Mournful told him truthfully.

" You knowed Ferguson had other men. Did you think you could get away with this kind o' stuff against the big outfit Ferguson has ? "

" Ferguson's outfit ain't as big as it was."

" It's big enough an' you an' your outfit is gonna be reduced some. Where's your horses ? "

" Not far off."

" I'll tell you what we're gonna do. I'll take just two men. We'll be right behind you. We'll all go down the street. If any o' you makes a break, o' course, we'll shoot your lights out. Then we'll ride out on the desert."

Mournful had difficulty in concealing his satisfaction. The way to where the horses were was the easiest way to the desert. Mournful's hope was that his captors would continue in that way.

" Go out the back way, one by one," the man ordered.

Out there he told the men who had originally been in the room to ride to where Mournful had said the horses were and to bring them here. Mournful's heart sank. The man might elect to go along the street and emerge on the desert where Mournful's waiting men could not see what had happened.

The men were back in a few minutes with the horses, and the men whom Mournful's men had been holding up in front of the saloon came around, with Mournful's men in front of them.

" So, fresh fella, you ain't as smart as you thought you was," one of those two sneered.

" How do you know how smart I thought I was ? "

"Aw, shut your mouth or I'll blow the hell outa you."

"You just mind your business," the leader said. "I'll tell you when the shootin' is to begin."

When all the men were mounted, the leader rode out to the street alone. He returned after a moment and said: "They's quite a few people in the street now. Martin, you fellas better ride like nothin' was the matter. I won't monkey with you. We can get outa this town 'thout anything happenin' to us after we blow you apart."

"I ain't fool enough to start anything," Mournful said.

The man ordered them all to ride to the street. Mournful fairly held his breath.

And then the leader turned his horse in the direction in which the remainder of Mournful's men were.

Well, Mournful told himself, mebbe he and the men with him would die, but this other outfit hadn't a chance in the world. They would be eleven men against more than a score. Mournful also saw that this leader and the men with him had come into the town by another way, else they would have seen those waiting men.

"Soon's we get free of these buildin's, send your horses along," the leader said. "We been seen all right an' some wise hombre might get suspicious an' a posse might folla us. These damn towns around here seem to be able to round up a posse from nowhere."

"You found that out at Yuma, did you?" Mournful, riding near the man, asked.

"Keep still," the man ordered, but his voice was not harsh.

Mournful guessed the fellow had hit the trail of wrong-doing because the life of a working puncher had been too tame for him. However, he had not lost his sense of humour, though he had undoubtedly robbed and murdered in his time.

"Jest as you say," Mournful agreed.

They came to the third building from the last. The leader said: "Hit it now. I don't see any action back in the town, but you never can tell. Keep goin' till you have to breathe your horses."

The horses were sent into a gallop and they sped around the last building and struck out on the sand. Instantly that leader caught sight of Mournful's men out there. Some of his men began to slow down.

"Keep on," the leader ordered. "My Gawd, don't you

see that if we turn back them fellas will come after us to find out what it's all about ?"

Mournful saw that his men were all mounted. They were prepared for any emergency, and the emergency was here. They turned their horses so that they faced the oncoming animals.

"Ride close to them," the leader continued. "We can't act like we was avoidin' them. Martin, if you so much as peep, I'll take it on myself to blow you to hell."

"I ain't peepin' none."

"Are them your men ?"

"Hell, I'm on'y a puncher."

"I didn't ask you that. I asked you was them your men."

Mournful took his time. Inevitably these men were being carried closer to Mournful's men. Mournful looked at the ground as if he had not heard the latest statements.

"You hear me ?" the leader asked.

"I'd advise you to ask them," Mournful said. "You c'n see what they're doin', can't you ?"

What Mournful's men were doing was to spread out, so that they blocked the way of the approaching men. It was a definite act of hostility and the fact that all the men had drawn their guns gave the act force.

"By Gawd, they're gonna hold us up," one of the captors said. "We better get outa here."

"Don't be a fool," the leader said. "If them is Martin's men, we're gone. If we kill these fellas, I hate to think what'll happen to us. There's just a chance they ain't Martin's men. Seems like a big bunch for a puncher to have. Martin, if you say a word against us, so help me I'll plug you."

"I'd hate to be dragged across the sand till I was dead," Mournful said. "Shoot me now, you sucker. Them is my men an' they got you foul. Jest put bullets into all of us an' see what happens to you."

Mournful's men began to move forward, their guns on the mixed outfit which was coming toward them. They seemed to think, along with Mournful, that there would be no shooting.

"Hop to it!" Mournful pressed. "It'll be your last chance."

"Will you give us a chance ?" the leader asked. "I mean to ride ?"

"Stop your horses."

The leader called a halt.

"Me an' my men is ridin' to one side," said Mournful. "You c'n have your chance to shoot us."

"Don't you stir."

Mournful set his horse in motion slowly. He kept his eyes on that leader and saw that he did not even raise his gun. The other held-up men followed Mournful's example and presently they were all to one side. Mournful's men halted a dozen paces from the crooks.

"What is it, Mournful?" one of the punchers asked.

"I really don't know," Mournful answered. "These fellas held us up after we'd been doin' some holdin' up our own selves. Looks like we held up the wrong men an' then these fellas held up the wrong men—an' it was just one gen'rul big mistake."

The leader laughed and said: "That's the idea. None of us knowed what was goin' on, I reckon. Well, now that the mistake has been explained, we'll just go back to town."

"Wait a minute."

Partch pushed his horse forward from the horses of the other men. He said: "Ride out here, you sucker? Take a good look at me."

The leader rode out, for he appeared not to recognize Partch with his glasses on. Partch removed them. That leader started.

"Yeh," Partch rasped. "I'm Partch, an' you, damn your hide, are one o' the Ferguson men that lied me inta prison."

"Why, I ain't never seen you before."

"You rotten liar! It was you that give the worst testimony against me. I doubt if I'd been found guilty if it hadn't been for you."

Partch was a flaming man now. He restored his glasses and drew his gun.

"I'm gonna kill you," he cried. "You made me suffer. You turned all the men that knowed me against me. There I was in my home country, as contented as any man. I hadda sneak away. I had to come to a country where I didn't know nobody, where I didn't have a soul in the world to turn to, till Mournful Martin showed up."

"Will you give me a chance?" the leader asked.

"Say you was lyin'."

"About not knowin' you? Shore I know you, you crook. You was as guilty as hell, an' you was found

guilty. All your neighbours lost cows, but you didn't lose none. If other crooks was workin' with you—hell if Ferguson was workin' with you—that's exac'ly what would have happened. You're a cow rustler, an' you know it. Martin, the fella has fooled you. I *know* he was hand in glove with Ferguson."

"But he was the on'y man you testified against," Mournful said. "Then you kep' on workin' with Ferguson."

"Because Partch turned against us. He wanted to hog the hull business."

"So you thought you'd come down here an' grab off the money he got for his ranch up north. Your story's too thin."

"I'll shoot it out with him," the man cried. "I'll take a chance."

"Nope. I won't allow that. You're too fast fer him."

"How do you know that ?"

"I been lookin' you over."

"You're damn right, I'm too fast for him, an' for every damn man here. Not one o' you dast face me."

"I've took a chance with a lotta men," Mournful said. "I just kinda reckon I'll take a chance with you. You're Ferguson's right-hand man. I don't think you should go on livin'."

'An' when you take a chance with Mournful, you take a chance with the best damn gunman that ever forked a horse," a puncher stated.

That leader turned to Mournful and looked him over. Mournful raised a long hand, spread his fingers, and rubbed his chin. The leader's face fell.

"Is that true ?" he asked.

"I don't know everybody in these parts," Mournful said. "Mebbe since I was here last some young fella has sprung up that is faster with a gun than I am, but you ain't that fella. If you want some o' my medicine, jest git off'n your horse an' we'll see what's what."

The man was silent for a while. Then he said in a low voice: "I guess I don't wanta mix with you. It ain't that I'm afraid o' you, but you got too many men."

All the men who had been under his command in the absence of Ferguson slipped away from his control. They even moved their horses aside.

"You've called yourself a gunman," one said. "W've followed you. Now you're scared just about outa your

pants. Why don't you get a promise for all of us an' go up against that fella? I've heard you say that the man don't live that you was afraid of."

"If I got Martin, I'd be riddled," the man declared. "Ain't you got sense enough to see that? We ain't none of us got a chance."

"You're afraid," the other man declared.

The leader's gun was in his hand. Mournful saw rage bring the pallor of death into his face under his tan. That pallor gave his face a sickly hue. He suddenly lifted his hand. Before he could fire at the man that had derided him, Partch fired. The gun fell into the sand. The man tried to hold himself erect. He was successful for five seconds, though blood was staining the clothing over his chest. Then he slid from his horse and his face was buried in the sand beside his gun.

"I had a right to do that," Partch said. "I had a right on my own account, an' he was gonna kill that other fella."

"You had a right," Mournful agreed.

He ran cold eyes over the remaining men. He asked nothing of them. He merely let those cold eyes tell all of them what was in his mind.

He saw terror was in the face of the man who had been near death. He waited.

"I'll tell all," the man said.

CHAPTER XV

Death in the Desert

"Don't you tell nothin'," one of the other men cried. "These fellas will kill you anyhow. An' you won't be safe from Ferguson, even if they let you live."

All the other men seemed to be of that mind. They moved away from the speaker as they had moved away from the man now lying dead in the sand. That speaker eyed them. He said: "You fellas are takin' orders from me now. I'm the boss. You know that if you know anything. You that has got so much to say come back here. Move lively! I'm runnin' things."

The man addressed went for his gun, rage robbing him of all control. He was too slow. The self-appointed

leader's gun flashed out, and he shot the other man before he could defend himself. That man died in his saddle and also fell into the sand.

The killer appeared about to put his gun back into its holster. He turned to Mournful, bringing his horse about. Mournful saw that only the tip of his gun barrel was in the holster and that he had a firm grip on the butt. Mournful watched and waited. He knew that this fellow was going to take a chance. The man suddenly spurred his horse and tried to send it behind Mournful's horse. Mournful spun that horse about and put his gun on the man as the latter lifted his hand. The man would not be stopped. His intent, Mournful saw, was to cover Mournful and threaten him with death. Mournful could not allow that hand to be raised higher, though he was aware that he would not be instantly shot. The man had invited death, and death was his as Mournful pulled his trigger.

Three men were now in the sand.

Mournful's men had their guns on those who remained, and they sat silent and motionless, staring, fixed eyes on the three.

"I reckon there ain't gonna be no chance for us," one man at length murmured. "Whatcha gonna do—hang us?"

"We're gonna make you give us some infermation," said Mournful. "We wanta know where Ferguson is now."

"We don't know."

"I c'n b'l'eve that," Mournful went on. "Where is Ferguson gonna be? Where you gonna meet him?"

"Can we pull off to one side for a minute, to talk this thing over?" a man asked.

"Go ahead. Don't take long. I ain't enjoyin' this heat none. I wanta git goin'."

The men withdrew and leaned to each other and engaged in earnest talk. Again Mournful watched carefully. He saw two of the men finger their gun butts, and it was not difficult to guess what their reaction to the talk was. Mournful became convinced that they were going to try to shoot it out, though they were only one to four. It would be a last desperate play. Mournful looked along the line of his men, raised his gun, patted it, and nodded toward the grouped men. His men understood, for they became rigid in their saddles, their guns ready.

At last those conferring men straightened up. They began to turn their horses very slowly. Mournful saw

that if he had not been on guard, they might have killed a number of his men, even a sufficient number, so that some of the attackers could get away. Those attackers seemed to have decided that they would take that chance. Each man probably hoped that he would be one of the lucky ones. What happened to the others was of no moment.

"We give up," said one of them. "We see we can't do nothin'. You can have our guns."

As if they were going to surrender their guns, the men dropped their hands and started to draw. In a fraction of a second, Mournful perceived, those guns would flame. Then, in the expected confusion, the men would try to flee. They were now fully convinced that only death awaited them. Death preceded by torture probably.

Mournful and his men covered them. Four pairs of eyes were on every man. Some took their hands from the gun butts, but four flashed their guns. They were riddles. Now seven men were in the sand and only four remained. Those remaining shot up their hands.

"For Gawd's sake," one moaned, "don't murder us."

"Have you ever murdered anybody?" Mournful relentlessly asked.

"I've shot it out with——"

"I didn't ask you that. Did you ever murder anybody?"

"Ferguson's crew is a murderin' lot."

"An' you've done your share?"

"I s'pose I have. When you work for Ferguson, you gotta do what he says. He's a gunman, Martin. You may be as good but the man don't live that's as good as he is."

"What fer lookin' fella is he?"

"He's as tall as you are, but he's built like—like—well, straight up from his boots. He don't drink, he don't smoke. He's han'sum. Black hair an' brown eyes. His eyes is clear an' allus cold. He's gettin' along in years now. I guess he must be halfway between forty an' fifty. He's got some gray along the sides of his hair. When you meet him, you better get him an' talk about it afterwards. He ain't never been caught. That's how good he is."

"You're one o' them fellas f'm Yuma," said Mournful. "What's gonna happen at Yuma?"

"I can't tell you. The three towns—Phoenix, Tucson an' Yuma—has been looked over. Ferguson will decide

what's to be done. Course, the first thing will be to get Partch's money. Ferguson figured that Partch wouldn't have had time to get the money to a safe place. He wouldn't leave it up north, because, as Ferguson knew, he didn't mean ever to go back there. Ferguson b'l'eved he would have it on him or around him some place. Ferguson's plan was to go to the Partch place when he found out where it was, an' kill what men Partch might have an' then make Partch pony up."

"An' what's to happen to Partch?"

"Ferguson is gonna use him if he thinks he can be put to any use. Otherwise——"

"Both the Partches was to be killed?"

"I guess you can see how Ferguson works."

"What fer fella is Ferguson when he's jest bein' social—say, in a saloon?"

"You'd like him."

Mournful thought of Staves. Staves was not naturally a killer, but whisky drove him wild. Ferguson, according to this man, did not drink. He was always normal. He could be pleasant, but at heart he was a killer. Well, it took all kinds o' men.

"Well, here's the important question," said Mournful. "Where was you gonna meet Ferguson?"

The man lowered his eyes. All along, Mournful had noticed, he had had an air of eagerness. He was looking for an opportunity to lie, so that he could gain a little time. He looked up.

"Ferguson will kill me for this," he said, "but we was to meet him here."

"Take that fella away, some o' you boys," Mournful said. "He's run outa the truth."

"Hones' to Gawd——" the man protested.

"No more," Mournful declared. "I give you your chance not to lie. You got along fairly good at first, but you hadda lie at the last."

Half a dozen of Mournful's men rode up to the man, surrounded him and took his reins. They started to lead his horse away, but he went wild. Propelling himself out of the saddle, he landed behind one of the punchers. His wildness gave him strength and he clutched the puncher and his hands sought the puncher's throat. That puncher reached back and his hands came together behind the other's neck. The puncher ducked his head, to keep those seeking hands from his throat.

"Leave us alone!" he yelled.

The struggle of the two men sent them to the sand, with the puncher on top. He struck the man in the face three times and then he drew himself up, so that his knees were on the man's chest. Again he struck him and he lay still.

The puncher ran to his horse and took down his rope. He lifted the man's head and slipped the rope about his throat. Then he started for his horse.

"I ain't never seen a man madder'n you are," Mournful drawled. "Course, you got a right to be mad, but it ain't gonna git us what we want if you choke him to death. Why don't you let him come to an' then make him talk? I'll leave the job to you. I'll keep out of it."

"Hell, Mournful, I give him what he was tryin' to give me. I ain't gonna let him go on livin'. He's a killer. This hull outfit is killers. You know an' I know that Ferguson ain't comin' way over here, at least not at first. He's goin' to Partch's."

"If you know that, I reckon there ain't nothin' more to say," said Mournful. "Still, mebbe that fella will have changed his mind when he wakes up an' finds a rope around his neck. When he gives the first sign o' life, why don't you stand him on his feet an' see how he ac's when he c'n act at all."

"Oh, all right, Martin," the puncher agreed, "but you're slowin' things down. It's hot as all hell here now."

"I admit it's hot as part of hell," Mournful smiled.

"Mournful takes things as they come," Partch said.

"I don't know of no other way to take 'em," Mournful declared. "You gotta take 'em as they come or dodge 'em, an' I ain't no good dodger."

"I'm beginnin' to b'leve you think pretty well o' yourself, Martin," said the roping puncher.

"I gotta. I can't git nobody else to do it."

"The hell you can't. Here I am, holdin' a rope when I'd be usin' it if I had my own way."

"You got your own way. All you gotta do is to hop your horse."

"This fella is comin' to now. I ain't gonna help him up. Hell, let him scramble up by hisself."

The man revived and soon got to his feet. The rope was loose about his neck and, watching the puncher, he slowly began to lift it.

"Leave it where it is," the puncher ordered.

"You gonna drag me?"

"I shore am!"

"You gonna let him, Martin?"

"I reckon so," Mournful said. "You're the last o' the men that come from Yuma. You're the on'y man that can tell us why you come here instead o' goin' to Partch's place or to our town."

"Why, damn it, we don't know where Partch's place is."

"Some o' Ferguson's men knew. They went to Partch's ranch."

"Then Ferguson went to your town. He must be there now. We didn't know nothin' about that. We come here because all the men that was here an' in Yuma an' in Phoenix was to meet here an' compare notes. We was all to get information about the various places an' ask about Partch. If we didn't locate him, we was to go on to your country."

Mournful drew his gun and aimed it at the man's forehead. He threw up his hands and covered his face.

"That's tough fer me," Mournful said. "I use funny bullets. One o' them won't go through your hands, so I can't shoot you."

"Martin, what *do* you wanta know?" the man entreated.

"Ferguson is gonna meet all you fellas here—or thinks he is?"

"He ain't! I don't know how I can make you b'l'eve that, but it's the truth."

"I reckon it is," Mournful said. "Well, boys, we'll go on home now. Whatcha wanta do with these fellas? Mebbe we could use 'em over in our country. Mebbe we could let 'em drift in on Ferguson."

"Not a bad idea," the puncher who had gone wild agreed.

"Ride ahead of us," Mournful ordered.

"Martin, is there any chance to get some water before we go on?" one of the prisoners asked. "I ain't used to this country. I'm beginnin' to feel kindafunny. I reckon the heat's gettin' to me."

"We all need water," Mournful said. "Wer'e goin' back to the town. Don't drink too much. We'll take some with us. There's a little matter to be cleared up there, too."

"What's that?" the man asked.

"I think you're the fella to do it," Mournful said. "We'll go to that Saloon where we was before. You

c'n tell that bartender where the body of the marshal c'n be found."

"I——"

"Oh, you know. You got him outa the way. I've tol' you you're gonna live a little longer. If you don't wanta, that's all right with me."

"You gonna ask that bartender to give you some time to get away?"

"Cer'nly. I don't wanta mix with no posse. I might have trouble convincin' a posse who I was. I want the matter of the marshal straightened out, though."

By the time they reached the saloon, the man who had complained of the heat was about all in. Mournful thought this the hottest June day he had ever seen in this country. He believed the desert temperature must be around a hundred and forty. He was a dry man and he was thoroughly dry now. A little sweat stood on the faces of the other men. Mournful was aware of the danger of a sudden cessation of that sweat.

All the men drank water, for they knew the danger of having alcohol under their belts when they started across the desert again.

"Drink it slow," Mournful said. "We'll wait a while an' have another before we leave."

"I don't think I can make it," the wilted man said.

"Mebbe you're gonna pass out now," said Mournful carelessly. "You better speak your piece while you can."

"Whatcha want me to say?" the man asked miserably.

"You was one o' the fellas that was in the mountains. I been wonderin' why you went there. I c'n think o' on'y one thing that would do it. You tell the bartender what it was."

"You ain't gonna let the bartender leave, are you?"

"If this fella gives you a important piece o' news will you stay put for an hour after we leave?" Mournful asked the bartender.

"I shore will!"

"It may p'vent a run-in between us an' a bunch o' men here in town," Mournful went on. "You don't want no killin', do you?"

"I sh'd say not! Business is bad enough as it is."

The room was so small that the men overcrowded it. Mournful wanted the information imparted, wanted more water, and then wanted to be on his way. An hour would give him ample start.

"Git it off your chest," he ordered the man.

"You'll find the marshal's body up in the mountains a short ways, bartender," that man said. "I didn't have nothin' to do with killin' him. The men that pulled it off is dead."

"I won't say nothin' for a while," the bartender promised.

The men drank more water. As Mournful sipped his he belatedly glanced at the door which led into the back room. It stood ajar a little. He turned angrily to the bartender.

"Has somebody been listenin' beyond that door?" he asked.

"Who would be? I didn't know you'd be back."

Mournful walked to the door and threw it open. No one was in it, but the remnants of a cold meal were on the table. Mournful returned to the bartender.

"Who was eatin' in that room a little while ago?" Mournful demanded.

"Why, the saloon has got an owner. He had a bite to eat before he went down town."

"What'd he go fer?"

"Why, he's got two places. He spends part of his time here an' part of it in the other place."

"Did you tell him anything?"

"I didn't! I've seen too many fights to be int'rusted in any of them, long as nothin' happens to me."

"I don't b'l'eve you," Mournful declared. "I think your boss has gone to give the alarm. I think he heard what was said here."

"You're wrong, mister. He left before you come. He went out the front way. Why'd he go out the back way of his own place?"

"Because he didn't want us to see him. He didn't leave before we come. Now, you tell me the truth or I'll blow you apart."

Mournful understood that the threat was idle. He could not kill a bartender merely because he was suspicious of him; and the bartender seemed to understand that, too.

"I dunno why you'd blow me apart," he said. "I ain't done nothin'. I've treated you gents the very best I knowed how."

"Well, you c'n do somethin' more," Mournful said. "You c'n go to the door an' take a peek. See who's in the street."

"I'll do that an' you c'n keep a gun on me. I ain't tryin' to fool you none."

He rounded the end of the bar and walked steadily to the door. He pushed one open and looked in one direction and then in the other. His attitude was that of a man who saw nothing unusual. He pushed the door open a little farther as if to get a better view.

And then he suddenly sprang through the door, and his running feet made a hollow sound on the board walk.

"I guess we're up against it," Mournful said. "We made a mistake in all comin' here together. Well, I'll see what's goin' on."

"That owner was shore in the back room listenin'," said a puncher. "He's had time to stir up the hull damn town. Martin, we gotta shoot our way outa this."

"Can't be done," Mournful declared. "We'd find ourselves in a mess we couldn't git out of. We'll have to use our heads 'stead of our guns."

"These fellas will lie their heads off," the puncher said.

"I know it. We'll jest have to stack the truth up against their lives."

Mournful walked slowly to the door and opened it. Across the street there were fifty men at least, and an equal number stood in the street in each direction. They had a varied assortment of weapons: six guns, shot guns, rifles.

Mournful found himself covered by the men across the street. It seemed to to him that about every able-bodied man in the town had been gathered. He soon gave over that idea, for other men were advancing behind those in the street.

Putting up his hands, Mournful went into the open.

CHAPTER XVI

Disbelief

Mournful's mind was so wholly occupied with what all those men might do that he forgot something he should have remembered. So far as he could see at the moment, he had nothing to prove that he and his men had not been implicated in the disposal of the marshal.

"Come over here," one of the group across the street shouted.

The men who had been coming along the street arrived and stood behind those already there. Mournful had never faced so many hostile men. He was anxious, but not wholly on his own account. His men were in the saloon, and they were fighting men. They might take it into their heads to fight now. They could do a lot of damage by firing from the door and the windows.

When Mournful, having walked between the groups in the street, reached those opposite him he stopped. A man immediately was pushed out in front of him. Mournful regarded that man calmly.

"Is this the chief fella?" a townsman asked.

"That's him. By his talk I knowed he was the boss."

"You run that saloon, don't you?" Mournful asked. "You were in the back room, listenin' to what was said. You run out an' spread the alarm. Didn't you see that there was two sets o' men in there—some prisoners an' some free men, me among them?"

"Now, just a minute," said the man who had summoned Mournful. "We'll do the questionin'. You keep your mouth shut 'cept to give us the proper answer. You're just as near bein' strung up as ever any body was. Our marshal has been killed, an' you know about it. Did you help kill him, or did you do it by your lonesome, an' why did you do it?"

"I didn't kill him," Mournful answered. "The man that did it or was in on it is my prisoner in that saloon. As fer keepin' my mouth shut, how can I explain anything if I do that?"

"By answerin' my questions," the man snapped.

"Well, who are you?"

"My name is Randolph. I'm a business man in this town. I guess I'm as good a citizen as the next."

"Shoot your questions, then."

"What's your name?"

"Martin."

Mournful did not say Mournful Martin, for he was afraid that his nickname would only rouse derision in these men.

"Where you from?"

"Oregon."

"What you doin' down here?"

"Visitin' at the Winfield ranch."

"They's a story around that ol' Winfield was murdered a while back," Randolph said. "What you know about that?"

"I helped catch the men that murdered him."

"You a cowman?"

"On'y a puncher."

"An' you come from Oregon just to pay a visit to the Winfields?"

"I come down there with my boss, Danforth. He's been sick."

"That name is kinda familiar to me," said an oldish man.

"It oughta be familiar to any man with gray hair," Mournful smiled. "Danforth was quite a figger in this country years ago."

"Seems to me I remember that," the man said.

"Let's not go inta any hist'ry," said Randolph. "You got a big bunch o' men in that saloon, ain't you?"

"Yeh, an' four pris'ners. Three of them was in on the murder of the marshal, I think."

"You think? Don't you know?"

"Ask this saloon keeper what he heard."

"Never mind about the saloon keeper. You're gonna tell what you know."

The eagerness of the men who had been in the street overcame them, and as many of them as possible pressed in behind Mournful; and the others pressed in behind them. Mournful was pushed forward, so that he was against Randolph and the man behind him was against him. He lost his temper a little.

"Can't you fellas git back some?" he asked. "I don't wanta be smothered."

"You're gonna get worse'n that," Randolph declared. "First I'll take your gun."

"Go ahead!"

Randolph snatched out the gun, and Mournful, with angry, suspicious men all around him, was additionally helpless. He reflected, however, that being without the gun he might have more chance.

"You fellas in the street step along," Randolph ordered. "Give us a clear way to the saloon."

Five minutes were required to clear the way, for the men in the rear seemed loth to move. Since they were so many, they wanted to be in the thick of things. It was a fact that they cared little about the marshal. The mob spirit was at its height.

"Now," Randolph told Mournful, "you tell the truth or we'll hang you high."

"Why don't you take it easy?" Mournful asked.

"I got a big bunch o' men in that saloon. They ain't gonna let you take me one step away from here 'thout startin' somep'n. Why, this street will be filled with dead men afore you c'n hang me. . . . Well, hell!"

Mournful had remembered the cowman and his punchers, now in the saloon. In all that had occurred he had not thought of them. They should however be able to establish Mournful and his men. With brightened eyes and his slight smile on his lips Mournful said, "They's a cowman that grazed cows in the mountains in that saloon. Call him out, an' he'll tell you the truth."

"What's his name?"

"Damn if I know."

"You expect us to swalla that, huh? We'll have the truth from you."

"All right! They's a gent named Ferguson that operated once in Oregon. He sent to prison a man named Partch. He's in that saloon, too. From bein' in prison he's almost blind. This here Ferguson is due over in the town near the Winfield ranch before long. He's had men here, in Phoenix an' in Yuma lookin' things over. If me an' my men hadn't come on the men here you'd have been raided if things looked good. They's on'y four o' them men left now. I was gonna take 'em over to Winfield's an' see if I could use 'em when Ferguson arrived."

"An' what happened to the rest o' the outfit?" Randolph scoffed.

"They're layin' out in the desert with bullets in 'em."

"Oh, your men killed 'em?"

"We did. They wouldn't be good. They thought they was killers."

"So that makes you an' your outfit killers o' killers?"

"That's it."

"I think you're the damndest liar that ever lived," Randolph asserted.

That oldish man stepped out and looked at Mournful keenly. He said, "I don't know about this. This man don't ac' or look like a liar or a crook. He may be tellin' a straight story."

"You keep outa this," Randolph snarled. "I'm runnin' things."

"You look to me like a cowman," Mournful told the oldish man.

"Retired. I live here in town." He turned to Randolph. "Don't you tell me what to keep out of or

step into," he went on. "I been in more jams than you ever dreamed of. Recollection o' Danforth is comin' back to me clearer. If this puncher works for Danforth, you better go slow with your hangin', Randolph. I don't know much about you, but I can see that you're the kind o' fella that will raise hell when he's got a mob at his back."

Randolph raised his voice: "This fella can't explain nothin'. What'll we do with him?"

"Hang him!"

The shout, Mournful heard, was not unanimous. He looked about and saw doubt in the faces of some of the men. It seemed to Mournful that that retired cowman had not been long in town, but in the short time he had probably been recognized as a man of substance.

"Fletcher," said Randolph, "I'm takin' this man away from you."

"Mebbe you can do it, mebbe not," the cowman said, "but if you do, before we go inta this thing deeper, I'll make you face me with a gun in your hand, just you an' me alone. I promise you that, Randolph. An' I'll promise you further that I'll blow the hell outa you. I still own a ranch. I got some good men on it. If any man here puts a hand to a rope, he'll have to answer to me."

"How'd you like to have a hand on a rope that was about your own neck?" Randolph asked.

A slow anger showed in Fletcher's face. He knotted his fists at his side. Randolph, Mournful saw, was the more powerful man. His own hands knotted. Mournful, no matter what happened, could not allow this square old cowman, the kind of man Mournful admired most, to be struck by a younger stronger man. Randolph's right hand moved. So did Mournful's. Mournful struck Randolph back into the arms of those behind him. Randolph was supported, but he was helplessly gasping. Mournful had put everything he had into that blow. Fletcher handed his own gun to Mournful.

"You better take his gun away from him 'less you want a riot," Mournful told the men holding up Randolph.

There was silence among the men who had observed the incident. Some had been unable to observe it. Fletcher took advantage of that silence to step into the street. He held up a hand for silence.

"Men," he said, "we can have plenty trouble here if we want it. There's a big bunch o' men in that saloon. Seems to me they're bein' damn patient. This man out here,

Martin by name, says there's a cowman in that saloon that can explain everything. I say let's have him out."

"Why, shore !" a man in the crowd roared.

Mournful had turned with Fletcher and his back was to Randolph. Mournful suddenly received a blow on the back of the neck. The blow sent him to his knees. He came up instantly and wheeled. Randolph, not expecting Mournful could rise so swiftly, was just beyond Mournful. Mournful struck him below the chin and, since no one was near enough to catch him, he fell to the ground. Mournful merely stepped back.

"A lotta you seen that," Fletcher yelled. "If this man is a killer, he certainly knows how to rule himself. You don't see him ragin', do you ?"

"That's right," said a man in the crowd. "By gosh, he's a cool one. Let's have that cowman out here. We don't wanta hang the wrong man."

Randolph got to his feet and went for his gun. Mournful had a gun in the pit of the man's stomach before he could draw.

"Don't do it," said Mournful calmly. "I don't wanta have to kill you. To me you're jest a braggart that fights when he's got strong backin'. If that ain't true, step out with me an' we'll see." He raised his voice. "Hell, I may be a killer or anything else you wanta call me, but I ain't a coward. I'd be ashamed to be headed by a skunk like this fella."

Randolph stood there, with his hand on the butt of his gun. He was goggle-eyed. A man in the crowd yelled: "Let him have it, Randolph." A large number of other men roared. Then Fletcher said to Randolph: "Get to hell outa here, fella. You ain't runnin' things. You're just hankerin' to get your hand on a rope. I'll take charge."

Randolph retreated from Mournful's gun and disappeared in the crowd.

"I'll tell you what I'll do," Fletcher told the men who could hear him. "I'll go inta that saloon an' bring that cowman out. If this man Martin is a crook, you know I won't come out at all. I'll be held so the men in the saloon can dicker with you. How's that ?"

"Don't you do that, Fletcher," one man in the crowd broke the silence; but another yelled: "Go on, Fletcher. You'll be safe. I ain't takin' the opinion o' this here Randolph. Damn if I don't think he's yella."

Fletcher walked slowly across the street. He looked back

when he reached the door of the saloon and waved a hand. Then he disappeared inside. In less than a minute he was out with the cowman at his heels. The crowd roared its approval as the two men crossed the street.

"I'll tell you what this man has got to say," Fletcher yelled.

He and the cowman talked together for some time. Then Fletcher went into the street and repeated the story of what had happened in the mountains.

"Why," he cried, "this man Martin was dealin' with a bunch o' crooks—horse thieves, for one thing. Anybody know this cowman? He's got a ranch in the mountains, includin' a mesa beyond them."

No one responded that he knew the cowman. Those close enough stared at him without recognition. Then Mournful noticed a stir in the crowd to the left. He saw presently that a lanky man was pushing his way through. He was able before long to come to the cleared space and he made his way up to the cowman.

"You fellas oughta know me," he said. "You oughta know I got a ranch. I been drunk in your damn town often enough. I know this cowman. His ranch is just this side o' mine. He don't come to town. He sends men in for supplies. He knows the whisky in here is rotgut, so he don't drink, an' he ain't got nothin' to come to town for."

"He's got a ranch in the mountains?" Fletcher asked.

"That's what I tried to say."

"Tell us what you know," Fletcher told the first cowman.

The cowman told about the stolen horse. Fletcher turned to Mournful and asked: "How many men left o' that outfit?"

"Four," Mournful answered.

"You go inta that saloon an' you an' some o' your men bring 'em out."

"I'll bring out all my men," said Mournful. "You want them to come with their hands in the air?"

"There ain't nothin' in the air for them to pluck," Fletcher retorted.

Mournful went into the saloon. The four men appeared ahead of him, and his men poured out behind him. Mournful urged the captives across the street and his men followed. They were a grim-looking crew as they rolled their eyes from side to side, watching the crowd. Mournful lined the four up in front of Fletcher.

"You stole a horse?" Fletcher asked.

"Why, one o' our horses went lame. We jus' borryed a horse to get to town."

"Tell 'em you're Ferguson's men," Mournful ordered. "Tell 'em who Ferguson is."

"We ain't tellin' nothin'," the speaker of the four said. "You think we're damn fools?"

"That's plenty," said Fletcher.

He turned and pointed his finger at several men. They came up.

"Horse thieves," Fletcher said. "Take 'em away."

Fletcher seemed to have known the proper men to pick. One of them said, "From what I been able to gather, this fella Martin has got more on these fellas than merely stealin' a horse. Mebbe he has got use for them."

Mournful had thought he might use the four men, but he gave over the idea.

"I don't want 'em," he said.

"Take 'em away," Fletcher ordered.

The men protested their innocence. When their protests were ignored, they cursed Mournful. They were eventually forced along the street, and that was the last that Mournful ever saw of them.

"What can we do for you, Martin?" Fletcher asked.

"I ain't modest," said Mournful. "We got a long hard ride ahead of us. We'll need somep'n to eat, an' water."

"I'll fix you up."

"How 'bout you an' me havin' a drink together?"

"Where's that saloon keeper?" Fletcher called.

The saloon keeper came out from the crowd and stood in front of the cowman.

"You didn't use good common sense," Fletcher said. "You didn't know the diff'runce between honest men an' crooks. You sh'd have been able to pick out the crooks from what was said in your place. Instead, you come runnin', sayin' a bunch o' horse thieves was in your place. You oughta be fined. You oughta be made to buy a drink for the crowd."

The saloon keeper helplessly looked about at the two hundred or more men. He said disconsolately, "It'd break me."

"Well, let it go," Fletcher laughed. "Come on, Martin. I'll buy a drink for your whole outfit. Meantime I'll have food an' water got ready for you."

He spoke to several men and they made their way

through the crowd. As he and Mournful and Mournful's men, including the cowman and his punchers, lined up at the bar Mournful said: "My gosh, we didn't make them fellas tell they murdered the marshal or where his body is."

"Don't worry," said Fletcher. "I been pickin' men for a good many years. The men that took them crooks away will get outa them everything they know. Them fellas won't be hanged for horse stealin'. They'll be hanged for murder."

After a while one of the men to whom Fletcher had spoken came in to report that the food and water was on the men's horses, left a little way from the saloon. Mournful and his men all bade Fletcher, the other cowman and his punchers good-bye.

Presently Mournful was leading his men down the street and out on the desert. Partch rode at Mournful's side.

"That was a close call, Mournful," Partch said.

"How's your glasses fittin' your eyes?" Mournful asked.

"Good. Wasn't it a close call?"

"Nope. You'll allus find when you git a big bunch o' men together that a few squareshooters will be among 'em."

"It saved us from a messy job." Partch declared.

"Yeh, it done that."

"Couldn't you have used them men, Mournful?"

"I think so. I planned it."

"Why didn't you bring them along?"

"It's allus a good idea to let other men have their own way when it don't make a hell of a lotta diff'runce," Mournful declared. "Besides, the important thing was done."

"What was that, Mournful?"

Mournful let his horse plod along through the sand for a while. Then he turned and smiled at Partch.

"The plain intention was to spread the fame o' ol' Mournful Martin," he modestly said.

CHAPTER XVII

Gone to Town

Mournful awoke in the Winfield bunk house two mornings later. He was not surprised that the sun was shining and that the men who had ridden with him were still asleep. Some of them had been asleep in their saddles after a long, hard ride over here. Even Mournful had been too tired to talk to anyone, even old Danforth. He and the others had tumbled from their horses, got as far as the bunks, and had fairly tumbled into those. Hour after hour they had sent their horses forward till they had had to stop to rest them. The horses, too, were all in.

Mournful dressed and went outside. The intense heat continued. No one was outside, the Winfield punchers, kept at the house, having gone to the other side of the bunk house to rest in the shade there. Mournful knocked on the door of the house, and Emily Winfield opened the door.

" Mournful," she exclaimed, " you look like the wrath. I thought you'd be better this morning. Know what time it is ?"

" Time don't never trouble me," Mournful said. " There allus seems plenty of it."

" I'll get hot water, so you can shave, and then I'll give you a breakfast that will do you some good," Emily said, and set the iron kettle on the stove.

As she busied herself, Mournful studied her. He was wide awake now, and he saw that something was amiss with Emily. She was pale, and as she handled the kitchen utensils her hands were unsteady. Hell, Mournful told himself, he had expected a little time of quiet here before he started after Ferguson, but there didn't seem to be no peace no place.

He shaved and ate before he began to ferret out the trouble. He had no reluctance in questioning Emily. Everything that happened here or else where, till this thing was cleared up, was his business.

" What's up, ma'am ?" he asked, as he rolled a cigarette.

" Up ?" Emily asked.

" You ain't foolin' me none, ma'am," Mournful declared.

"Somep'n's happened since I been away. I been through a lot, an' I reckon I got a right to be tol' about everything."

"My husband has gone to town," Emily said.

"Well, husbands often go to town. Whether it's important or not depends on what they go to town fer."

"George has gone to town to look for that man Ferguson," Emily admitted.

Mournful rose. He said gently, though he would have liked to be stern, "How come he done that, ma'am ?"

"He and Staves had a long talk with Johnny. They sent everybody out of the room. When they came here Staves went out, got his horse and rode away."

"He was goin' to town, too ?" Mournful asked.

"He said he was going home."

"He didn't say he wasn't going to town after he got home ?"

"No, he didn't say that."

Mournful was more worried than resentful now. If Staves had gone to town, he had waited and had gone with George Winfield. By now Staves was undoubtedly under the influence of whisky. He had undoubtedly got a description of Ferguson from Johnny. Half drunk, he would start a quarrel with Ferguson. He might not be a match for that killer, fast with a gun though he was. If Ferguson killed him, as he would have a right to do in the opinion of the onlookers, since he would have started the row, George Winfield would take up his quarrel, and George would be absolutely no match for Ferguson. Mournful did not know what progress Staves had made with Cora Masters—possibly quite a little. He did know that Emily, to whom trouble was not alien, would suffer intense grief if anything happened to George.

Damn them two, Mournful silently said. Why in hell couldn't they have let things go as they had been going ? Old Mournful Martin had been getting along pretty good. He was ready for Ferguson this morning. And there was no immodesty in his declaration to himself that Mournful Martin was the only man in this country who could successfully face Ferguson, that deadly gunman, who never drank.

"Who's with Johnny now ?" he asked Emily.

"Ina. They've patched up all their differences. He had quite a little pain for a while, but he's all right now."

"Where's Cora ?"

"With Mr. Danforth. He went back to bed early, the heat being so great."

"Will you go in an' tell that gal to leave Johnny to me fer a few minutes, ma'am?"

Emily left the room and came back with Ina. Ina smiled at Mournful. She seemed contented and happy.

"Was you with Johnny when he talked to Staves and Winfield?" Mournful inquired, and he could not keep a little acid out of his voice.

"Why, no. All three said they wanted to talk together."

"Did Johnny tell you what they talked about?"

"Why, Mournful, whatever Johnny told me I'd keep secret, wouldn't I?"

"I reckon you would. 'Scuse me."

He went through the door with a stormy look on his face. The stormy look cleared away when he saw Cora coming towards him. Gosh, he guessed he'd have that girl on his hands pretty soon. She was all ashine, and he believed that was on account of Staves. Staves had probably put his best foot forward while he had been here, had been kind and gentle as he could be when he was sober—and Cora had known almost nothing of kindness and gentleness.

"Staves around?" Mournful guardedly asked.

"He went home yesterday afternoon," she answered.

"Guess I'll ride over an' see him," said Mournful.

"He won't be gone long, Mournful," Cora said. "He promised to be back soon."

Mournful nodded and went on to Johnny Partch's room. As he did so, he roundly cursed Staves. Oh, yes, that fellow was head over heels in love with this girl. He had got to her pretty strong, and then he had gone to town to lap up some booze in the expectation of being in the right mood to meet Ferguson. Unreliable men! Men you couldn't keep your finger on! Damn the entire breed!

Mournful entered Johnny's room, and Johnny gave him a glad greeting and asked what Mournful had been up against while he had been away.

"Aw, shut up, you fool!" Mournful exclaimed.

A little anger, followed by complete dismay, struck Johnny. He lay and stared at Mournful. At length he got out: "Why, Mournful, what's bitin' you? What have I done?"

"Nothin' much," Mournful said disdainfully. "You've on'y sent Winfield an' Staves to town to be killed."

"Staves an' Winfield? I didn't know they'd gone to town."

"What did you tell 'em?"

"Why, we was [illegible]' about my brother's trouble, an' about Ferguson, an'——"

"An' the hull damn business. Well, Ferguson is due in town, an' he's a gunman. He's better'n Winfield an' prob'ly better'n Staves. An' he don't take a smell o' liquor. Staves is drunk by now—or dead."

"My Gawd, Mournful!" Johnny whispered. "Oh, if I was on'y on my feet!"

"Yeh, you'd ride to town an' git a bullet in your own hide. What you wanta do is to lay here an' think about yourself an' try to get wise to yourself. You tell anybody whatever comes inta your head. Winfield's wife is out there scared to death. Cora Masters is as happy as can be. She thinks Staves on'y went home. Well, I'll go to town. Mebbe this killer Ferguson'll git me, too."

"Mournful, I'm sorry. I'm a damn fool."

"That's what I tol' you," Mournful snapped, and left the room.

In the kitchen Mournful found the three girls. He smiled at them and waved an airy hand.

"Mournful"—Emily stayed him—"where are you going?"

"To town."

"You'll hurry?"

"Fast as I c'n."

"And you'll take some men."

"All the men I had before."

"And you'll be back soon?"

"Oh, shore!"

As he was about to leave Cora, in her turn, stayed him with a question: "Mournful, do you think Staves went to town with Winfield?"

"Why, he said he was goin' home."

"He could have waited an' gone on to town. It's nearly eleven o'clock. He should be here by now."

"All I c'n do, ma'am," said Mournful, "is to stop at his place an' find out."

"You'll send him over here if he's at home?"

"He's a kind of a hard fella to send any place. I'll tell him what you say."

Apparently Emily had spoken to Ina, for Ina stood with downcast eyes, asking no questions, offering nothing.

Outside Mournful found all his men ready to ride, including Partch. The men had a fresh horse ready for Mournful, too.

" Partch," Mournful said, "you better stay here with the Winfield boys. I've heard that when a man gits glasses he oughta take it easy fer a few days. You been ridin' in the heat an' your eyes looks red. You don't wanta git back to where you was, do you?"

Mournful knew nothing about what happened to a man when he first put glasses on, but Partch's eyes did look red. For that matter, so did the eyes of all the other men.

Partch hesitated, and then he proved that his restored sight was precious to him. He said, " All right," in a low voice.

" You have a good long talk with that brother o' yours," Mournful said. " Try to pound some sense inta his head."

Partch nodded, and Mournful directed the men to ride as if they were going to the Staves ranch. When they were out of sight of the house, however, he turned them back towards the road. He was positive that Staves had gone to town, and he justified himself in breaking his promise to Cora by telling himself that if Staves had really remained at home he would be over at Winfield's shortly. He was sure he would not be over at Winfield's.

When the men came in sight of the town, Mournful selected three to ride into town with him, telling the others to ride out on the flat. There was the usual objection, but Mournful turned a deaf ear to it, and he and the three men left.

They rode slowly, and when they came to the first saloon they rode up to the hitch rack and dismounted. Telling the men to stay where they were, Mournful entered the saloon. He asked about Winfield and Staves, but the bartender had not seen them. Leaving this saloon, Mournful went into all the others between it and the saloon in which the first row had taken place.

As he entered that saloon he saw that five men were in it, Staves and Winfield were leaning back against the wall which the bar fronted in a sort of alcove off the dance floor. Two men who looked like punchers were drinking whisky at the bar. Believing Staves and Winfield were watching those men Mournful proceeded to the bar. The same bartender was not on duty, and Mournful was safe from recognition from that quarter.

Mournful could only guess about those two punchers, if punchers they were. One guess was easily made. They had been away from whisky for some time, and they liked

it. They proved that by taking two drinks before one was before Mournful.

Mournful slowly drained his glass. One of the two punchers leaned to the other and spoke at some length in a low tone. Mournful waited for the retort of the second man. He leaned his forehead on the bar, clinching the bar rail with a hand on each side of his head. Understanding of his loud laughter was easy. The first man had told a story unfit for the ears of decency. Mournful was satisfied with that. Neither of those men suspected Staves, Winfield or himself. If they were by any chance Ferguson's men, come to spy out the situation, they had had no description of Mournful Martin. It was improbable that Ferguson had any description of him, for, so far as Mournful knew, no man who had been sent on any errand by Ferguson had returned to report to him. That bred in Mournful a sound suspicion that these men were Ferguson men. By now Ferguson was deeply concerned about the failure of his men to return.

Mournful called for another drink. When his glass was in front of him he suddenly acted as if he did not want to drink alone. He looked at the two punchers and then at Staves and Winfield.

"Come up an' have a drink, boys," he said.

He had a dual purpose in that. He wanted to interest the two punchers, and he also wanted to discover whether Staves had had a drink. Staves carried his early drinking so well that Mournful could not decide that from where he stood.

George Winfield did not drink, but he started for the bar. Staves, remaining where he was, said coldly: "You got me mixed up with somebody else, fella. I don't never drink."

"You mean you've let more'n the half of a day go by 'thout takin' a drink?" Mournful demanded.

"That's it, an' don't ask me no more questions."

"Have it your own way," Mournful said.

Winfield gained Mournful's side and ordered a bottle of pop. The two punchers stared open-mouthed.

"Don't suspect Staves o' takin' a drink," Winfield whispered to Mournful. "You couldn't hire him to take one."

"That's the best news I've had in a long time," Mournful said.

"He's got that girl Cora, I think," Winfield said.

"Which is better news."

Winfield slowly drank the soda and Mournful tossed off his drink. The two punchers, rather drunk now and heretofore owlishly staring, came to life.

"Why don't you ask a coupla fellas that c'n drink to drink with you, cowboy?" one asked.

Mournful was silent. The man stared at him angrily, and as he was about to express that anger vocally the door was opened, and the three men whom Mournful had left entered. Mournful signalled them to silence by a swift raising and lowering of his right hand, the hand away from the two punchers. The three merely lined up at the bar and called for drinks.

The two punchers seemed to have decided that Mournful was alone. Three punchers were in the room, but Mournful had not invited them to drink with him. They would undoubtedly be neutral, for they seemed not to be acquainted with Mournful any more than they were with the two men. As for those other two—hell, one drunk pop and the other didn't even drink that. The two men had felt hostility in Staves's refusal.

"Hey, you long fella," the puncher who had spoken before asked. "Did you hear what I said?"

Winfield left the bar and walked over to Staves. The three other men, having had their drinks, retreated from the bar. The other puncher laughed loudly. It shore looked as if those two could have some fun with Mournful. Mournful idly leaned his arms on the bar rail. He saw that those two men were somewhat like Staves when they were drinking. In a less determined, less able fashion, they were inclined to pick a quarrel when they were under the influence of liquor.

"I reckon I could stand one more 'thout gittin' drunk," Mournful told the bartender. "I shore do hate to see a man's liquor go to his head."

"You meanin' that for us?" one of the men demanded.

"I jest said somep'n," Mournful retorted. "If your foot goes inta the boot an' fits snug, jest leave the boot on."

"Why, damn your——"

"Easy!"

That came from one of Mournful's three men. The two punchers glanced in the direction of the three. Their eyes bulged. One of Mournful's men said quietly: "You might look at them two other fellas against the wall, too."

The punchers wheeled about from the bar and found Winfield and Staves covering them.

"Well, what the hell!" one gasped.

"All friends o' mine," Mournful said.

"Why, you dirty double-crosser!" one cried.

Mournful slowly came out from the bar. He stood looking at the two little men for a moment. Then he flashed his gun. A single oath issued slowly from the lips of one of the men.

"Put up your guns, boys," Mournful said.

The five men holstered their guns. Mournful slowly holstered his, but his hand was not far from the butt.

"You both got guns on you," said Mournful.

The two men tried to laugh, but it was a futile attempt. Then one babbled: "'Scuse us, mister. I reckon we been takin' on too big a load o' this here rye whisky. I guess we better be on our way, hadn't we?"

"Where would your way be? Out to Partch's?"

Astonishment sobered the two men somewhat, and Mournful continued: "Y' know Ferguson don't drink. If he found out you two had got drunk while you was on an errand for him, I reckon he'd shoot you."

The fumes of liquor and Mournful's incredible knowledge held the two silent. They stared at him as if he were a strange figure from another planet.

"We don't know what you mean," one got out.

"Bartender," said Mournful, "could we have the use of that back room for a minute? If the boss comes in, just tell him Long is still on the job."

"You might tell him, too, that I'll shoot his heart out if he's got any objections to us bein' in that room," Staves called. "Mournful, I talk like I been drinkin', but I ain't. When I say anything from now on, I'll mean it down to the ground."

"I know it," Mournful said. "Fella, I'm almost proud o' you, on'y such a thing as pride ain't in me."

"You damn liar!" Staves exploded.

"Git along to the back room, you two," Mournful ordered, and to one of the three men he added: "Go git a rope."

"My gosh, you ain't gonna hang a man right in that back room, are you?" the bartender gasped.

"I dunno," Mournful retorted. "I'm mad clear through to my backbone an' from there on out. How c'n I tell what I'll do? When I git a few drinks I deal out death."

"You think you're smart, don't you, you sucker?" Staves said. "Well, you can't make me mad. Damn if I don't like you too much."

Leaving the two remaining men to disarm the other two and to watch them, Mournful walked over to Staves and Winfield.

"Mebbe I can't make either o' you two mad, but you make me mad," Mournful said. "What in hell did you mean by comin' in here?"

"Did you expect me to lay idle all through this thing?" Winfield asked. "Hell, am I a man?"

"Don't ask me. I don't know nothin' about that. On'y you got a pale-faced wife out to your house. An' you, Staves, have got a little girl that you tol' you was goin' home. I'd hate to be a liar to a woman that thought a lot o' me, which there ain't no chance of ever happenin'."

"I didn't wanta worry her, Mournful," Staves said meekly. "But I felt just like Winfield done. We thought we might meet up with Ferguson."

"If you ever do, dodge outa sight," Mournful advised. "He's too fast for either of you. You leave him to me. Lemme tell you: The fella never takes a drink. He's very fast: an' you know what leavin' liquor stric'ly alone does for a gunman's hand an' eye."

"You just had two-three drinks," Winfield reminded him.

"Oh, that don't make no diff'runce. I'm peculiar. I c'n do things that other men can't do an' git away with them."

"There's the man with the rope," Staves said.

Mournful looked around. The man was entering with a rope in his hand.

"Inta the back room, you two," Mournful ordered.

CHAPTER XVIII

Venture

"I AIN'T gonna waste no time on you," Mournful said. "I'm beginnin' to think that time is short. Where's Ferguson?"

"Why, cowboy——" one of the two men began.

"Wait a minute," Mournful interrupted, for a plan was beginning to form in his mind. "Have you ever heard of a fella called Mournful Martin?"

"Ain't never heard of him or met up with him," the man declared.

"I wish I could find that fella," Mournful declared. "I bet I'd talk him outa his boots or somep'n."

"Is he bad?"

"Naw. On'y thinks he is."

Mournful indulged in this bit of by-play because he knew that anything might happen. Ferguson's patience must be worn pretty thin by now, and he might come in here in force. Mournful wanted to keep his identity hidden.

He went on: "I heard that Ferguson has been losin' some men. Me an' these boys is open fer a proposition at all times. Now, where's Ferguson?"

"You wanta hook up with——"

"Don't say that, you fool," the other man said. "He's stringin' you along. Ain't you got no brains?"

"So you're the fella with brains, are you?" Mournful asked. "I jest wanted to find out which one o' you was the toughest. Now, since you wouldn't fall, I'm askin' you where Ferguson is."

"I don't know no such man."

Mournful motioned to the man with the rope and said. "All yours. Burn him up!"

The man approached the one with brains. He fell back against the wall and cried, "My Gawd, you wouldn't burn me with that rope, would you?"

"You heard me get my orders. I allus do what I'm tol'. You might as well stand still. Somebody will knock you out, an' when you come to you'll find this rope had wore off the flesh down to the bone."

"You won't make me tell nothin'," the man declared, in disbelief that the puncher would go through with his act.

"Stick out your hands. Hold your wrists close together."

The man obeyed, and the puncher wrapped the rope about them. He pulled the rope over the wrists once and then back. It was tightly drawn and beneath the rope there must have been the start of red welts. It would not take long to saw into the flesh. The puncher started the movement again. The victim screamed.

"Stop it!" he panted. "I'll tell you where Ferguson is. I'll tell you all about him."

The puncher removed the rope and turned to the other man. He asked: "You want a taste o' that?"

"No, no, not me!"

"Better loosen up that tongue o' yours, then."

"Yeh, I'll talk."

The puncher moved back and confronted the two men. He said, " Go on."

" Ferguson is hidin' in the hills over yonder, waitin' for us to come back," the uninjured man said. " He expects reports from Yuma, Tucson an' Phoenix by night. Course he expects our report at the same time. We was to look this little town over an' find out where Partch's ranch was."

" That," said Mournful, " is lie number one. You better be careful. Ferguson already knows where Partch's ranch is. He sent men there."

" Fella, I'm tellin' you the truth," the man stated. " If men was over to Partch's, they justa been throwin' Ferguson down. Ferguson has sent out a hull lot o' men. None o' them has come back. You know how it is with a bunch o' them crooks. Sometimes they light out on their own. Everybody knowed about Partch an' his money. Ferguson keeps things to hisself when he can. But he couldn't keep the Partch matter to hisself ; it was too much in the open."

" It came inta the open when Ferguson's men swore Partch inta prison, huh ?" Mournful asked.

" Yeh, that was the way of it."

" Partch was innocent, then ?"

" Course he was. Ferguson is smart. He allus picks out somebody he can lay the blame on."

" Tell me exac'ly how I c'n git to Ferguson."

The man told the trails which must be followed.

" How many men has Ferguson got ?" Mournful inquired.

" On'y a few now. I reckon none o' them other fellas is comin' back, is they ?"

Mournful ignored that and went on : " I'm goin' through your pockets. Don't stir."

He examined all the pockets in the men's clothing and produced a total of four hundred dollars.

" You fellas are pretty well paid, ain't you ?" Mournful asked.

" Hell, we don't get nowheres near what we should get."

" That's because you ain't got no brains an' Ferguson has. Well, I reckon that's all."

" You gonna keep our money ?"

" You ain't gonna need no money."

Mournful took the men's guns and laid them on the floor. He said, " Come on out. I'll interduce you to the worst bunch o' crooks you ever met up with in your hull life."

"We've tol' you everything," one of the men whined. "You oughta let us go."

Mournful and the other men merely forced them out of this room and out of the barroom. He and the four other men rode down to where the body of the group had been left, making the two walk ahead of them. Mournful merely turned the men over to Staves and Winfield, to do what they pleased with; and it was not difficult to guess what would happen. Then Mournful drew Staves and Winfield aside.

"After you git rid o' these fellas, go home an' let them girls know you're all right," Mournful said. "That's the biggest thing in your lives and theirs right now. They're worrying themselves to death. Take all the boys with you."

"An' leave you here alone?" Staves asked incredulously.

"Yeh. I got a plan."

"Mournful, we won't do it," Staves said. "Why don't we get rid of these two an' then ride out to where Ferguson is?"

"Because when these two an' none o' the others don't come in tonight, Ferguson may quit. He may go back north or across the Mexican border. You want him to escape?"

"If you can ride to where he is, so can we."

"I don't want us to go up against him while he's hidin' out in the hills. That'd mean dead men on both sides. I want him to come to us when we're ready for him. I dunno how many men he's got. I wanta find out. After you git to Winfield's all safe, send all these men to Partch's. Tell 'em to keep under cover over there. I think me an' Ferguson an' his men will be over there by tomorrow. These boys will be in shape to start a battle before Ferguson knows what's goin' on."

"An' you'll be right in the line o' fire," Staves objected.

"My job'll be to git myself outa line," Mournful said. "I've done it before, an' I b'l'eve I c'n do it again."

"It sounds like a crazy scheme to me," said Winfield.

"All right," Mournful pretended to yield. "I'll take all these boys with me an' see some o' them shot to death."

"We'll go along," said Staves. "We can all clean up on Ferguson's outfit."

"So you say. All right. Come right along. An' if you git bullets I'll carry the news to them two girls. I'll tell you somethin', Staves: that girl Cora ain't never had

nothin'. You could give her everything. She's starved for a kind word. Come with me, take a bullet, an' let her cry her eyes out."

"You think she cares that much?" Staves wavered.

"It's a hell of a thing fer three men to be talkin' about," Mournful said, "but I *know* she does. An' as fer Winfield's wife . . . well!"

"Are you sure you can get away with it, Mournful?" Winfield asked.

"I ain't sure o' nothin'. I'll jest do the best I c'n."

"All right," Winfield agreed, and Staves, in a kind of helplessness, repeated the words.

"You ain't gonna folla me, are you?" Mournful asked. "You ain't gonna cross me up? You'll stay at home an' send these boys to Partch's?"

"Well, I won't promise about that," Staves said. "Hell, you can't expect us to hole up while everybody else is busy."

"I won't promise, neither," said Winfield.

"I dunno as it makes much diff'runce. You oughta be able to wipe out Ferguson's men 'thout losin' a man on your side. Well, so-long."

Mournful started his horse along the road. He had gone only a little way when half a dozen men overtook him. Three rode in front of his horse so that he had to stop it.

"What now?" he asked.

"Where you goin', Martin?" a puncher asked.

"Mebbe that's my business," Mournful retorted.

"You ain't gonna be left here alone," the puncher declared.

"All right," Mournful said heatedly. "The way to stop me is to put a gun on me. Then you c'n take me wherever you damn please. I know what I'm doin'. If you inta'fere with me I quit the hull damn business."

"No, Martin," one of the punchers smiled, "you ain't no quitter. We been with you for quite a while now. We have seen you'll go up against anything; but a man can go up against too much."

"So help me, if you stop me now I'll go back to Winfield's an' set with Danforth," Mournful declared.

All the other men rode up. Mournful had to explain in detail what he was going to do. He asked the men whether it wasn't better for one man to take a chance of being killed than for thirty men to do it.

"It ain't a question of killin'," said a puncher. "It's just a question of takin' a chance. You think we're gonna

ride away an' let you ride right in on Ferguson ? Hell, that'd be a rotten thing for us to do."

"All right. Let's set our horses right here till hell freezes over."

"A nice little freeze would be fine right now," a puncher grinned.

Mournful sat his horse in silence. He smoked a cigarette and then he became motionless. There was no expression on his face.

"This can't go on," Winfield said at last. "I guess we'll have to let Mournful have his way."

"By gosh, I never seen such a stubborn man !" a puncher cried.

"Stubborn or not, I'm bein' kep' from the thing I'm gonna do," Mournful declared. "'Course, you fellas are too many for me. You c'n ride to where Ferguson is an' try to clean up on him, but I won't be with you. I tell you I c'n lead him to Partch's. I never felt surer of anything in my hull damn life. You're gittin' me mad. In one more minute I ride to Winfield's an' there I stay till Danforth is ready to go home."

"Danforth ain't goin' home till next spring," Winfield said.

Mournful again became motionless in his saddle. After a while he let his head fall as if he were going to take a nap.

"Looks to me like we got one of two things to do," said Staves. "Let Mournful go back to Winfield's or let him have his own way. I b'l'eve he means what he says."

"I guess we gotta let him go," Winfield agreed, and the punchers were silent.

Mournful took that silence for assent, and he started his horse again, Staves called to him : "Would you have quit, Mournful ?"

"Figger it out for yourself," Mournful called back and struck his horse into a lope.

The horse was fresh enough, and he rode it hard till he came within sight of the mountains. The Ferguson man had told him where Ferguson was, so that he could ride within a hundred feet of the camp. He was aware that there was no use in his hailing. He would be held up no matter what he did. So he rode boldly along.

He thought the time was about midnight, for a somewhat lop-sided moon had risen at nine o'clock. It was well up in the sky now, and the light was good. Mournful did not look towards the mountains. He leaned a little in his

saddle and looked ahead. The order which he had been expecting came.

"Stick 'em up!"

He raised his hands, and two men came to their feet behind his horse. He heard their slight movements and looked around.

"Where you think you're goin'?" one of the men asked.

"I gotta know who you are before I tell you," Mournful said.

"Is that so?" The speaker asked his companion: "Whatcha think? Shall we call him?"

"I reckon we better. Sit still, cowboy, till I take your gun."

Mournful let himself be deprived of his gun. It was a useless weapon here. The man dropped it, went along a little way and disappeared into a canyon. Ferguson's men must have been a considerable distance up that canyon, for the man was gone for quite a while. When he approached Mournful another man was with him. Mournful let a stupid expression come into his face. The two men stopped beside his horse. One of them had graying hair, but his skin was smooth and the flesh of his face seemed firm. His eyes were bright. Mournful expected him to be threatening. He was not.

"Where you ridin' to, cowboy?" Ferguson asked.

"Why I jest got a litle business to do up along here." Mournful said. "You ain't got no right to hold me up an' take my gun."

Mournful learned that Ferguson was quick-witted then. He asked the man beside him: "Why did you take this cowboy's gun? Where is it?"

The man stooped and picked up the gun.

"Give it back to him," Ferguson ordered.

The man handed the gun up to Mournful, but was careful to keep his own gun on the long man. Mournful would have been the stupid person he looked if he had not guessed what Ferguson's purpose was. He wanted to see whether Mournful was the stupid person he appeared to be or whether he was a gunman. Well, Mournful would let him know. Instead of thrusting his gun into the holster, he took hold of the holster with his left hand and awkwardly poked the gun down with his right.

Ferguson laughed, and Mournful was entirely satisfied.

"Who's your business with, cowboy?" Ferguson asked.

"Well, I ain't gonna tell the first man I meet."

"That's right. Don't blab your business. But I think you'd better tell me; this man has a nervous trigger finger."

Mournful looked at the man with the gun and jerked over in his saddle.

"Look at me," Ferguson ordered, in a somewhat different voice.

Mournful looked at him, and Ferguson flashed his gun. He had done Mournful some service. He had wanted Mournful to see how fast he was. Fast, Mournful conceded, but not fast enough.

"My Gawd," Mournful whispered.

"I think you'll tell me who you're lookin' for now, won't you?" Ferguson purred, restoring his gun.

"Couldn't you tell me your name?"

"Tell me!"

"Yes, mister. All right, mister. Course I'll tell you. I meant to tell you all along. But I guess you're one o' them gunmen—them killers—that shot them two poor boys. I don't mean you done it your own self. I mean you're part o' that killin' outfit."

"What in hell are you talkin' about?"

"Well, I'll give you the money. I guess you don't want nothin' from nobody but money. You should oughta lemme keep this, though. Them two boys give it to me so I could make Fer—him—b'l'eve I had come f'm them after bein' their friend."

"Are you lookin' for a man named Ferguson?" Ferguson demanded.

"He ain't done nothin'," Mournful declared. "He's a ranchman. Least one o' them boys said he was gonna buy a ranch down here. You needn't go gittin' on his trail."

"Lemme see that money."

"Then will you lemme go?"

"Hand over the money."

Mournful produced the money. He had rolled it all together. Ferguson took it and looked down at it with wondering eyes. Mournful waited for the gunman to look down. But he had been too well trained; he kept his gun and his gaze on Mournful.

Astonishment alone was in Ferguson's eyes when he looked at Mournful.

"Where did you get this money?" he asked.

"Why, them two boys give it to me when I found them dyin' on the flat. They tol' me they'd been set on by a bunch o' men an' jest shot to pieces. Them boys tol' me

that I could keep the money if I done an errand fer them."

"Wht was the errand?"

"Mister, you got the money. Lemme go. I wanta git on."

"I'm Ferguson," Ferguson said.

"Huh?" Mournful said.

"I tell you I'm Ferguson. I'm the man you're lookin' for."

"If you was, you'd gimme back that money. One o' them boys said you'd lemme keep it. My gosh, there's near four hundred there. It'd take me a year to make that much. I could go back to Californy on that an' have a good time."

"You're from California?"

"Oh, shore."

"What're you doin' over here?"

"I got fired as usual. I'm a tophand, but I don't seem to keep no job for more'n a little while."

Mournful's chest rose and fell as he let a long sigh escape. And then the thing happened that he had hoped would happen. Ferguson looked at him out of eyes which he brought a look of sadness into.

"A man can be too good, you know," he said soothingly. "Other men gets jealous."

"That's it," Mournful said. "Why, the foreman come to me an' he said, 'You damn fool, won't you never learn to throw a rope? Is there anything you c'n do?' An', by gosh, I'm as good a roper, rider or gunman as there is in the hull o' Californy."

"I'm sure you are," said Ferguson in that same soothing voice, and he didn't know how close to the truth he was. "Well," he added, "here's the money. You can keep it."

Mournful siezed it eagerly, stuffed it into a pocket and cried: "By gosh, you're straight, mister! Them boys said you was. You *are* Mister Ferguson, ain't you?"

"Yeh, I'm Mister Ferguson. Ride ahead of me up the canyon. I want to hear your story. It looks as if two o' my men have been murdered."

"They shore was done to death, the poor fellas," said Mournful. "An', you sucker, what will happen to you soon will be plenty," he added to himself.

CHAPTER XIX

ANGRY IDIOT

MOURNFUL preceded Ferguson up the canyon and found a score of men waiting there. Mournful was convinced that these were the last of the Ferguson outfit. The man had had a big bunch of killers to begin with. Ferguson's manner at once became chilly. He was no longer the genial man who had fooled along with a halfwit, and Mournful saw that if he were not suspicious he was at least careful.

"Stay where you are," he told Mournful.

He walked over to the men, who had drawn together, and spoke to them in low tones. An argument was at once precipitated, and Mournful understood that all the men were not accepting Ferguson's view that Mournful was harmless. They eyed Mournful with open suspicion. Mournful found it difficult to maintain his pose. He slipped from his horse and began to test his cinches.

Presently Ferguson and another man, small, wiry quick in his movements, walked up to him. Ferguson was now cold as ice. The other man was sneering.

Ferguson stood to one side and the man confronted Mournful.

"I hear you're a tophand out of a job," the man jeered.

"That's me," Mournful declared. "There ain't no better——"

"So I been tol'. Well, some of us don't like your looks. You gotta gunfight me."

"Huh?" Mournful said. "My good gosh, fella, I ain't never done nothin' to you."

The man was inches shorter than Mournful, but he sundenly reached up and slapped Mournful across the face. Mournful's anger really flamed. He did not care about that, for Ferguson and his gunman had no way of telling whether it was the anger of an idiot or of a fighting man.

Quickly recovering himself, Mournful drew back his fist, held it straight behind him for a moment and then swung wildly. The man had, of course, no difficulty in evading the blow. He stood away from Mournful, half doubled up in mirth. Ferguson too, laughed.

Mournful was satisfied with his progress so far, but he knew that he must not carry his pose too far. To live, he must have worked off and on, and he must not show himself to be a complete fool.

"You c'n laugh," he said, "but if you'd got my fist in your face you'd laugh the other side o' your mouth. You're a reg'lar jumpin' jack. You jest step in here where I c'n hit you an' you'll find out."

"Jus' stand up in front of you an' let you slam me, huh?" the man asked. "Why, you'd knock me clean out."

"You bet your life I would!"

"Funny lookin' hombre, ain't he?" the man asked Ferguson.

"Don't insult him," said the relaxed Ferguson. "I think he's a pretty good-lookin' fella. He's got nerve, anyway."

"I got as much nerve as the next man," Mournful declared.

"O' course you have," Ferguson agreed. "I don't think I've ever seen a man swung at the way you swung at this boy."

"You jest stay on my side, Mr. Ferguson," Mournful said. "You'll find out."

He looked at Ferguson with dull eyes and found that Ferguson was now only amused. Mournful continued to believe that he was getting by.

"You didn't get me with your fist," the man said. "S'pose we try it with guns at, say, twenty feet."

Mournful let his shoulders droop. He was still looking at Ferguson, and he let a whipped-dog look appear. He said: "Why, Mr. Ferguson, I thought you wanted to know about them boys. I ain't done nothin' to this fella. What's he wanta gunfight me fer?"

"Oh, it's just a little test we put new men through. Y' see, if you prove you're good with a gun, I'm gonna give you a job on my ranch. I hire on'y tophands. You've proved you've got a strong right hand. Now we'll see how you are on the draw."

"You mean me an' this fella is gonna shoot in dead earnest?"

"Why, cer'nly! You wouldn't want a coupla bullets to go to waste, would you?"

"I don't wanta kill the little fella," said Mournful.

"You mean you don't wanta be killed," the man said.

Mournful looked around bewilderedly. There was, he

saw, a chance that Ferguson had somehow known him all along and was going to have him executed. Still Ferguson was arranging the gunplay before he had heard Mournful's story. He would want to hear that story, for, even if he suspected Mournful, he would believe he could get the truth out of him.

Also two men, almost as tall as Mournful, were approaching. One placed himself on one side of him and one on the other. Taking everything into consideration, Mournful decided that the battle was to be a sham. Ferguson was going to see how good he was with a gun.

"We're on'y gonna see that you get a square deal," one of the tall men said. "We're gonna make sure that fella don't fire before the proper time."

"Thanky, gents," said Mournful. "That's what I calls square. I ain't afraid o' that fella. I'll put a bullet inta him. I'll show you some shootin'."

"Shore you will!" The tall man faced the little gunman. "Walked over there a ways. If you shoot before I give you the signal, I'll drill you."

"I'll take care o' that," Ferguson declared.

"That's talkin', Mr. Ferguson," said Mournful. "Now, how do we go about this business?"

"Ain't you never been in a gunfight before?" Ferguson asked.

"Not like this. Course I been in lotsa posses that was out huntin' bad men."

The gunman had moved away some twenty feet and stood with his hands down. Ferguson said, "When I count three you can fire."

Mournful put his hand on his gun butt. Ferguson at last seemed wholly convinced that he had an idiot to deal with. He said, thickly because of his amusement: "No, no, you can't do that. You must keep your hand down."

"But I gotta draw my gun," Mournful said.

"Yeh, but drop your hand and bring it up when I say 'three.'"

Oh, yeh, I see," Mournful said, and dropped his hand.

Ferguson counted slowly. As he said the last number, Mournful crossed over his left hand and pressed it against the holster. Then he dropped his right hand to the butt and began to draw out the gun. The little man could have emptied his gun into him. The two tall men seized his arms. Mournful pretended to struggle and then yielded.

"Whatcha stoppin' me fer?" he asked.

"Look over where that fella was standin'," one of the tall men suggested.

Mournful looked over there and found the man gone. He asked: "Why, where is he? Wouldn't he stand his ground till I got my gun out?"

"Naw, he's hidin' behind all them men."

"Shucks!" Mournful said.

"Come over here, fella," Ferguson ordered, and led him to the group of men.

"You ever been a sheepherder?" Ferguson asked.

Mournful knew that Ferguson had to have an explanation of Mournful's inexpertness. He had guessed that Mournful was a sheepherder masquerading as a cowboy. That alone would explain what must somehow be a pose. Mournful dropped his eyes to the ground as if he were embarrassed.

"Come on, fella," Ferguson said. "It ain't no disgrace to be a sheepherder. In fact I own a great many sheep myself."

"Well, that's the way of it," said Mournful. "I ain't no cowboy, but all my life I've wanted to be one. I ain't so bad with a gun, am I?"

"I sh'd say not! You're all right! Now let's have the story about them two boys."

Mournful stared ahead of him into the moonlight. His face was troubled. Then he let it suddenly brighten.

"Jest the same, I done them two boys a good turn," he said. "I come here to tell you about them jest as I promised."

"O' course! We owe you a lot. Tell the story."

Mournful pushed back his hat and frowned as if he fought for recollection.

"Well, now, lemme see," he said, "I come down from the hills one day las' week an'——"

"You don't need to give your life hist'ry," said one of the men.

"Leave him alone," Ferguson ordered sharply.

"An' I got a gun that had been sent to me by a mail order house—an' a holster, too an' a gun belt. Them fellas cheated me. I don't write so very good. They shipped me this old outfit. Why you s'pose they done that, Mr. Ferguson? Well, no, that ain't the way of it. I got a new outfit, an' when I was ridin' acrost the desert a cowboy exchanged with me. Yeh, that was it."

Almost, Mournful saw, he had got into deep water. He

was having difficulty in continuing to pretend. Damn that runt who had faced him! He'd give him a chance later on. He'd show him what a real draw was. He'd show this hellion Ferguson too. . . . He was waiting now to see whether Ferguson swallowed his story.

"An' that made you good an' mad," Ferguson said, and Mournful realized that his face must be dark from anger.

"Course it made me mad."

"Well, tell us about findin' them two boys," said Ferguson quietly, and Mournful realized that he was still safe.

"I was comin' to town to git a few drinks an' kinda hell around, y' know, when I seen two bodies layin' in the sand. I thought they was dead bodies, an' I was gonna give them a wide berth, 'cause I didn't wanta git mixed up in nothin'. An' then I seen one o' them boys lift his head. Well, I got off'n my horse an' went up to him. He says to me, 'Cowboy, help me.' Well, I felt kinda good about that, 'cause he was a real cowboy hisself. I tol' him I'd do anything he said.

"It took him a long time. I thought sev'rul times he was dead. Then he tol' me to feel in the other boy's pants pocket an' git the money he had. Then he gimme the money he had. I thought that was darned square o' him. Yes, sir!"

Mournful stopped as if he had finished. He let his eyes brighten a little and felt of the pocket in which he had the money. The men stirred restlessly. They were men of action, and this piecemeal way of giving information irritated them. Ferguson, however, was motionless, silent, waiting for Mournful. Mournful was undecided as to what he had better do. Ferguson was keen. Somewhere Mournful might have misplayed his hand. It wouldn't take much of a misplay to prove to Ferguson that he was lying, pretending.

If he were detected, these men would give him a bitter dose of sheer agony.

He decided to make Ferguson speak first, and he stood there as if he were in a kind of dream.

"Go on," Ferguson said.

Mournful blinked, took a moment to appear to gather his wits.

"That boy took hold of hisself," Mournful said. "He tol' me he couldn't last long, an'' there was on'y one thing he wanted me to do. I tol' him I shore would do it. He tol' me to come here. Why, Mr. Ferguson, he even

lifted hisself up on the elbow of his right arm—no, his left arm. I reckon he was a right-handed fella, an' he drawed one o' these here maps in the sand.

"I said to him that I didn't need no map. My gosh, I have drove sheep all over here. Well, he tol' me to ride here an' find Mr. Ferguson. He tol' me to ride along the mountains an' I wouldn't have no trouble. I didn't have no trouble, did I?"

"No trouble," Ferguson said.

"He said to tell Mr. Ferguson that him an' his pardner had been got. He said ten cowboys rode in on them an' threatened to drag 'em an' burn their feet on a lotta stuff. He tol' me to git here in a hurry, 'cause he had to tell where you was, Mr. Ferguson. Seems——"

That electrified not only Ferguson but all the other men. Ferguson, however, exhibited no dismay. He seemed to become hard and cold. The other men exhibited fear and anger. One cried: "Why the hell didn't you tell us that in the first place?"

"Keep still," Ferguson said. "He's done us a good turn, slow as he was. This country is gettin' too hot for us. We gotta get out. Coupla you ride out an' see if there's anybody on the flat. Git goin'!"

Two men went back along the canyon and presently, mounted, dashed past the others. In their absence Ferguson said to Mournful: "I'm gonna ask you a few questions. Answer fast. You can see we ain't got no great time. Was the name of a man Partch mentioned by that boy?"

Mournful stared at him and then said, as if he were taken off his feet by astonishment, "That ain't no name of a man. That boy said 'partched,' meanin' he was about dyin' of thirst."

Behind Mournful a man ground out an oath. Ferguson met his oath with another, and now, thoroughly stirred, told the man he'd shoot his heart out if he made another sound.

"Was that all the boy said?" he asked Mournful.

Mournful puckered up his brow. At last he acted as if he remembered: "That boy said, 'Northeast from Winfield's'. That don't mean nothin'. The on'y outfit northeast from Winfield's is the ol' Schofield place. It's run-down ol' place, for Schofield is a very ol' man now. Why, I dunno if there's a cow on the ranch."

"How long since you been there?" Ferguson asked.

"I guess about six months, mebbe more. I don't exac'ly remember."

The men who had gone to the end of the canyon came back. They reported no one in sight as far as they could see.

"We got it," Ferguson gloated. "We know where Partch is holed up. We'll take care of him an' then we'll blow." He turned to Mournful. "This fella Partch—an' I ain't talkin' about thirst—is a friend of ours. Can you lead us to his ranch?"

"I don't know him," Mournful said.

"I mean, can you take us to the ol' Schofield ranch?"

"C'n I take you there? My gosh, I c'n take you there with my eyes shut; but there ain't nothin' there. The ol' man is kinda silly in the head. I dunno if he'd even reco'nize me."

"Oh, I think he would," said Ferguson. "How fast can you ride?"

Mournful seemed crestfallen and confessed: "Well, I ain't so good. I'm pretty saddle weary."

"Well, do the best you can."

"Shore, I'll do that."

"Bring up the horses," Ferguson ordered. "You, fella, mount. By the way, what's your name?"

"Martin," Mournful said promptly and looked at Ferguson: but there was no sign of recognition in Ferguson's face.

Mournful believed he was safe so far. How he was going to escape from this outfit when it arrived at Partch's and found a bigger bunch of men there, he couldn't even guess. Well, the outfit was riding to a fall.

Those three girls and the men they cared for were going to be safe before long.

"Get up on your horse," Ferguson ordered Mournful as the other horses appeared.

Mounful walked up to his horse and put a foot in a stirrup. He mounted awkwardly and turned the horse towards the oncoming animals. That permitted him to see that Ferguson had been watching him. The man turned towards his own horse with a satisfied expression on his face.

Ferguson led the riders out of the canyon. He searched the flat in every direction, but no one was, of course, in sight. Only Mournful knew that there was no pursuit.

"Ride up here with me, fella," Ferguson ordered.

When Mournful was beside him he struck his horse into a lope, and Mournful had to accompany him. Mournful had to be at his best now, for Ferguson did not take his eyes from him. He rode for a little way, bouncing in his saddle every now and then. At last he took hold of the horn and eased himself in his seat as he clung to the horn.

"Gettin' tired?" Ferguson asked, and Mournful was sure that he considered Mournful of value to him now.

Mournful compressed his lips and half closed his eyes. He said, however, "I'm a game fella. I'll stick 'er out."

Ferguson was aware that Mournful would not die in the saddle, and kept to the pace. However, after a while, Mournful leaned over the horn, dropped his reins and clutched the horn with both hands. Ferguson seemed not to realize it but daybreak was not far of. One glance at the moon told Mournful that. Mournful did not want this outfit to get to Partch's tonight. The men whom he had sent there might take it into their heads to go to Winfield's first and might arrive at Partch's in the morning. Ferguson would not ride in daylight.

Ferguson threw back a hand and his men slowed down. He slowed and called to Mournful to do so.

"Kinda tough goin'?" Ferguson asked.

"I'll be all right in a minute." Mournful gasped. There were no sounds of mirth behind him now. He realized that all these men were intent upon getting to where they thought Partch was and obtaining Partch's money. That desire swallowed up every other emotion.

The men walked their horses for a while and Mournful straightened up. At last a man called to Ferguson: "You know it's breakin' day?"

Ferguson lifted his head and looked all about. He said, "Hell!" violently, but quickly recovered himself and continued: "This man Martin has done us a good turn. We can't ride him to death, Martin are there more hills or mountains where we can rest?"

"Oh, shore," Mournful said eagerly. "I know a nice place where there's a little water an' some grass. You wanta go there?"

"We gotta get along. Can you stand another ride?"

"I'll try."

Again the horses were loped and Mournful pretended again. Daylight had spread over the flat by the time they reached an entrance to the hills. Mournful hoped that the trickle of water which he remembered out of the past had

not dried up. In Arizona water was not a dependable quantity.

They rode into the hills and found water. Mournful saw that his luck was holding. Every horse, every man had all they dared drink before Mournful was permitted to quench his thirst. He drank a little and sank to the ground, raised his knees, crossed his arms on them, and let his head fall to the arms as if he were utterly weary.

"Two o' you go out an' keep watch," Ferguson said. "Two more'll be out there in a coupla hours. We gotta stay here through the day."

"How 'bout food?" a man asked.

"We got on'y a little left. We can sleep now an' forget food. We'll eat just before we start."

Mournful remained where he was till Ferguson spoke to him: "You better lay down, fella, an' take a nap."

Mournful almost fell over on his side and stretched out. He closed his eyes and feigned sleep.

He was worried. He did not attempt to deny that to himself. The men due at Partch's might ride into view. The Partch buildings could not be seen from here, but Mournful knew how keen those men would be for action. They might not be able to still their restlessness.

Well, there was nothing he could do about that, and he let needed sleep flow over him.

CHAPTER XX

All Set

Mournful awoke in the middle of the afternoon. The heat was so great that even he was moist. He found himself on his back and rolled over on his side without opening his eyes. He listened, but there was no talk. The men seemed to be sleeping on.

"Hey, Martin!"

That voice was Ferguson's, and it was sharp. Mournful slowly opened his eyes and sat up. He was aware from the sound of the voice about where Ferguson was seated or stood, but he did not look at once in that direction. Ferguson's tone indicated that he was in no gentle mood. Something might have happened that stirred his suspicion. In that event Mournful Martin might soon be on the long trip.

"Come over here," Ferguson said as Mournful rubbed his eyes sleepily.

Mournful rose and found Ferguson seated in a little shade which the side of a hill cast down. Mournful crossed to him and sat down beside him.

"This is better." Mournful said.

"My Gawd, what heat," Ferguson muttered, and Mournful was reassured. He was the more reassured when Ferguson went on: "Now, tell me the layout over there at the Schofield ranch."

"How you mean—the layout?"

"What buildin's are there?"

"Oh! Well, the house ain't so very big, and it looks like it might tumble over any minute. They's a bunk house an'corrals, in about the same shape. I heard they ain't a cow on the place any more. I guess the ol' man is about ready to die."

"You haven't heard about the place bein' sold recent?"

"No, I ain't heard no such story, an' I reckon I'd have heard it if it was goin's round."

"How long since you quit herdin' sheep?"

"Oh, I ain't quit fer good. No use tryin' to fool you, Mr. Ferguson. You know I ain't no cowboy. I jest got a few days off to go ridin' round to have some fun. Gosh, will I have fun when I git back to town, with four hundred dollars on me!"

"You shore will!" Ferguson said. "But you better gimme that money to take care of. You might lose it."

Mournful saw that he had only a second to make a decision. If he made a wrong decision, there was again that chance that Ferguson's suspicion would be stirred.

"You don't think I wouldn't give the money back to you do you?" Ferguson asked, and permitted himself to smile.

"Oh, no, Mr. Ferguson! I'll be glad to have you keep it fer me. I was jest takin' my time because I ain't never had so much money before, an' I like the feel of it in my pants pocket."

"You don't wanta lose it, y' know," said Ferguson.

"That's right."

Mournful thrust his hand into the pocket which held the money and then he said, "Ouch!"

"What's the matter?" Ferguson asked.

"I give my hand a twist. I git the rheumatism in it ever' once in a while, an' if I twist it, I git a shot o' pain through me."

"Well, that's too bad," Ferguson declared.

Mournful drew out the money and handed it over. Ferguson thrust it into a pocket. Mournful was sure he would never get it back unless he took it from Ferguson's dead body. He'd just do that little thing. Four hundred dollars would buy two pretty nice wedding presents.

"Them fellas sleep like they was dead," Ferguson said. "Go round among them, Martin, an' wake 'em up. If they don't wake up prompt, give 'em a kick in the ribs—not too hard, y' know."

If he gave any of those hot, sweating men kicks in the ribs they would pay him back with interest, Mournful saw. Ferguson had a streak of cruelty in him. Nearly through with Mournful, as he thought, he wouldn't mind seeing the long man beaten.

"Oh, I couldn't do that, Mr. Ferguson," Mournful said. "I wouldn't never start nothin' when a man was asleep an' couldn't defend himself. Any man I fight has gotta be on his feet."

"Suit yourself," Ferguson grinned, and then the grin died and he regarded Mournful with malice in his eyes.

As Mournful went round among the men and roused them he understood that Ferguson might have him killed before the attack on the Partch place was made. Death for all these men lay over there, but Mournful's death might precede theirs. The only hope for himself that Mournful could see was in that short period of darkness which came before moonlight flooded the scene.

Then it occurred to him that Ferguson would use that brief period to advance on the house. He and his men would move forward in the dark. Why, shortly after sunset Mournful might die.

When the men had washed at the little stream they ate, and then Ferguson called them together.

"Any o' you got any ideas?" he asked.

Several men started to talk at once till Ferguson stayed them with uplifted hand. Mournful saw that all those men were afraid of Ferguson. They outnumbered him, but they sought to curry favour with him.

"One at a time," Ferguson said, "an' don't babble. Just talk straight business."

"Why, as many of us as you say will ride over there an' talk to them two brothers," a man said. "We don't need half the men here."

"You'll take everybody but two," Ferguson said.

"Damn it, I have to figger everything. There's always a chance that you'll meet up with difficulties. Them two fellas hate me like the devil. How do you know they won't be layin' for you? They might get half a dozen of you from the house if you ain't careful."

Mournful had taken care to seat himself, in fawning fashion near Ferguson, and Ferguson had paid no attention to him. Now Ferguson looked the men over. He pointed at two men, and Mournful lazily let his eyes drift to them. They were a tough-looking couple, and Mournful decided that they were going to be the men who would kill him after the riders left. Certainly Ferguson would not let him live to tell what he had heard and seen. There was proof of that in the fact that Ferguson was going to remain behind while his men went forth to make the Partch brothers tell where their money was hidden. And Mournful was sure that the riders would not be long gone before the two gunmen here went into action. Ferguson would expect to get the money speedily, and he would want to be up and away out of this country as soon as that was accomplished. He had lost too many men.

Mournful found a spot of stupidity in the man. Where did he suppose those men had disappeared to? He seemed not to have taken that into account.

The two men at whom Ferguson had pointed said nothing. Only Mournful saw pleased looks come into their faces. They were going to enjoy putting bullets into one whom they believed to be a simple-minded sheepherder.

The afternoon wore on and twilight came. Ferguson turned to Mournful and said roughly: "How far to that house?"

Mournful, as if still eager to please, told the men how to ride to the house. They went to the end of the break and held their horses there. Then darkness came swiftly. The men departed. Mournful did not know how swiftly he would have to act. He decided to wait till Ferguson spoke to those two men. Then he decided swiftly against that. The two men knew what their job was. They might come upon Mournful at any moment silently out of the darkness.

"Say, Mr. Ferguson," Mournful said.

"Yeh."

Mournful moved a little closer to Ferguson and went on: "They's one thing more I could tell you. It's about a girl."

"What sort of lookin' girl?"

The idea of mentioning Ina Harper had come to Mournful out of nowhere. It might, just possibly, be that Ferguson had seen her and was interested in her.

As if he should whisper, Mournful moved still closer so that his body almost touched Ferguson's. He described Ina fully.

"Where did you see her?" Ferguson asked.

"I was ridin' round an' found her on the road. She was pract'ly lost. She ask me where the Schofield ranch was. I tol' her an' she rode on."

Ferguson sat there as if frozen. Mournful had hoped for that, for Ferguson must be picturing the girl as in the house which his men were going to take over. If Ferguson knew Ina at all, he knew how high-spirited she was, that she would fight as hard as any man.

And in that frozen moment which held Ferguson still, Mournful dragged his gun. He pressed it into Ferguson's side.

"Move, you dirty pup, an' I'll blow you from here to hell," Mournful whispered. "I'm Mournful Martin. I'm knowed from Canada to old Mexico. The Partch brothers ain't in that house over yonder, but more men than you sent is. Your men will be shot so full o' holes, they won't have no blood left in their bodies. Now cross your arms on your chest while I take your gun."

The change in Mournful was so complete that Ferguson obeyed as if mechanically. Mournful took his gun in one swift movement.

"Now, you rotten killer, if you speak to them two men I'll blow you to hell jest like I said. Keep your mouth shut. I'm movin' away f'm you, but not so far but that I'll be able to see you."

Ferguson acted as if he were almost unconscious. Mournful moved away from him and stood back against the wall. He could just make out the two men seated on the ground, but he was positive they could not make him out. The darkness was at its deepest here.

Mournful looked along and down at Ferguson. He could catch the glimmer of Ferguson's face, and he was convinced that there was no blood in that face.

The killer was a thoroughly frightened man.

Sure that he would remain where he was, Mournful kept his eyes on the two shadowy figures, beyond him.

"It's time, ain't it, Ferguson?" one of the men asked. "I mean, time that them boys was over there?"

He did not mean that time." Mournful was not deceived. He meant that it was time to get rid of Mournful Martin, to them an idiotic sheepherder.

Ferguson did not answer. He seemed unable to make up his mind what Mournful wanted him to say.

"Ferguson!" the man called.

Still there was silence. The two men came to their feet and tried to pierce the darkness. As he could see Ferguson's face, Mournful could see their faces.

Ferguson also must have seen them. Losing control of himself, he shrilly cried: "For Gawd's sake don't shoot. You might hit me. I'm held up."

The two words barely reached Mournful, and he realized that the men were so astonished that they would be incapable of movement for a moment or two.

"Ferguson, you foolin' with us?" the man out yonder bleated.

"No! Don't come in here 'less you want the hell blowed outa you. That fella has got you covered with my gun an' his."

The men seemed unable to say anything more for the present. Mournful, however, found speech easy. He said: "Stick 'em up, you two sheepmen! High!"

Even before he stopped speaking he had moved three feet from where he had stood. There were two gun flashes out there, and the bullets struck the wall where Mournful had stood. His own guns emitted twin flashes—and his bullets found targets. One man dropped instantly and the other screamed. His scream had the quality of the scream of a wounded horse. Then he pitched over.

Mournful returned to Ferguson. He stood looking down at him for a moment.

"Well, killer," he said. "How do you like the way things stack up now? You rotten crook, you wouldn't even lemme keep them four hundred dollars. You want all o' it, don't you?"

"You *are* a gunman, ain't you?" Ferguson whispered.

"Me? I've heard f'm some o' your men that you're fast. You're up against a faster man, an' I'll prove it to you before long. An' you think you got brains. You had a lotta fun with a poor sheepherder, didn't you?"

"What happened to them two men in town?"

"Some o' my men took 'em away. You c'n guess what was done to 'em. It was the same thing, more or less, that was done to all the men you sent to various towns. You

lied about Partch an' sent him to prison. You heard he had come down here an' you wasn't gonna give him no peace. You was gonna rob him. Then you was gonna stage a lotta raids. Well, get on your feet. Then when I'm mounted hop your horse. We'll git outa here. Some o' your men might ride back. I don't think they will, though. You make one move an' out you go. Do you b'l'eve that?"

"I ain't makin' no mistake about it," Ferguson said.

Mournful led his horse around behind Ferguson's and made the man mount after he was up.

"Don't try to bolt," Mournful advised. "If you do, I'll knock you clean out inta the sand."

"You gonna kill me?" Ferguson asked.

Mournful saw the man was trembling all through his body. He had ventured many times and had never lost till now. He was stunned and frightened.

"Move along in the way I tell you," Mournful ordered.

Ferguson started his horse, but kept it under full control. He and Mournful moved out on the flat a little way and Mournful stopped Ferguson. They had not long to sit there. The faint sound of gunfire came to them.

"Your men are in it now, fella," said Mournful. "Most o' them is on the ground, I reckon. I ain't never had the hell blasted outa me, but I don't b'l'eve it's no nice thing."

They waited for not more than five seconds longer, and then they could hear that firing again.

"Near time for the moon to come up, ain't it?" Mournful asked coolly.

Ferguson turned his head and looked at the eastern sky. "I—I reckon——"

"Why them two I's?" Mournful asked.

"You're gonna kill me," Ferguson moaned. "Martin, I don't wanta die."

"Why, you could shoot it out with me, couldn't you?"

"Not in the shape I'm in now. This thing has been a shock to me. I thought I'd get outa this country with Partch's money at least. Now I am gonna be killed."

"Oh, well, we c'n hang you if you can't handle a gun no more," said Mournful cheerfully.

"I b'l'eve you would do that."

"Do it!" Mournful flamed. "What was you gonna do to me? You was gonna let them two ugly gunmen plug me. You was gonna leave me settin' there alone while

they done their work. I s'pose you oughta git a ton or so o' pity."

"The—the moon'll be up soon," Ferguson said. "The sky is beginnin' to get bright."

Mournful had never seen a man so disappointed, so bewildered, so frightened. Expectation of money, of hurting the Partch brothers again, had been his one instant, and the next instant the expectation had been gone.

"You had nerve to come in on us, Martin," Ferguson said.

Mournful believed his mind was so dulled that he was not even trying to flatter his captor. He didn't, Mournful thought, know what the hell he was saying.

The darkness began to give way. Glancing over his shoulder, Mournful saw the edge of the moon come up. He watched it till it was above the horizon. Then he turned back to a lightened world.

"Martin, look!" Ferguson yelled. "Riders comin'—six, seven of them. They may be my men. We better get outa here. If they come up to us I know you'll kill me. But Martin, my Gawd, they'll get you!"

Mournful's eyes had gone farther than Ferguson's and he made out that the half-dozen or so men fleeing were being hotly pursued; and there was no question but that they were Mournful's men. His men would not have been in flight. They couldn't possibly have run into trouble.

"I don't think none o' them is gonna get me," Mournful said. "Listen, you: I used two bullets on your gunmen. I got four left in each gun. I'm gonna use seven. The last one I'll keep fer you. You c'n see I'll plug you if you don't stay put, can't you?"

"Yes, oh, yes!"

Mournful waited for the flight and the pursuit to continue till the fleeing men were near. He counted eight instead of half a dozen. He fired the seven bullets, and his firing was simultaneous with the firing of the pursuers. When the sound had been briefly echoed, it was followed by silence.

Mournful enjoyed that silence. One more shot might have to be fired, and then the silence would be a complete and final thing.

A whispered "Oh!" came from Ferguson. Mournful said nothing, and Ferguson went on in that whisper: "They're all dead. Wiped out. I ain't got a man left, have I, Martin?"

"Fer his own sake, I hope not one is left," Mournful retorted. "I guess he'd find the goin' pretty tough."

"Alone," Ferguson breathed. "All alone. No help. You, Martin . . . all them men out there. . . . What a finish for me!"

"What kind of a finish did you expect?" Mournful asked. "Did you expect to marry Ina Harper an' live happy fer some time?"

"That girl, too," Ferguson murmured. "She could have made somethin' outa me."

He was silent then, drooping in his saddle, too shocked and weary apparently to be frightened any more. Fear would rise in him presently, though, Mournful was sure. The long man hoped the fella wouldn't go all to pieces. He disliked seeing any man go all to pieces.

Beyond Mournful and Ferguson the pursuers had stopped. Mournful called: "Me, I'm Mournful Martin. Don't shoot. I've had enough. I got a gent I want you to meet."

He saw the riders out there dismount and move about among those who had fallen, to make sure that there was none only wounded. At last those men remounted and rode slowly in on the two waiting men. They did not stop when they reached the two. They rode around them once, eyeing Ferguson as he sat his horse in the moonlight. Ferguson would not look at them. Mournful saw that his eyes were tightly closed.

CHAPTER XXI

Right into It

At last Mournful was faced by all those men, with Ferguson at his side. Mournful quickly ran his eyes over them. He found George Winfield was there. Well, Emily would have nothing to grieve about. Nor would Johnny Partch.

"Where's Pete Partch?" Mournful asked.

"Over at the house. Some o' the other boys is over there, too, o' course. We figgered we didn't need the hull bunch."

That was Staves speaking. Mournful had not found him because he was well behind the other men.

"You c'n come up here, Staves," Mournful said. "I ain't gonna hurt you."

Mournful raised himself in his saddle to get a view of Staves. Gosh, had the fellow got modest all of a sudden? At once Staves began to fall out of his seat.

"Grab him, somebody," Mournful called. "Hell, can't you see he's fallin'?"

Two punchers were near enough to seize Staves. One helped lift him into the arms of the other, descended from his horse, and then took Staves down and laid him on the ground. Mournful told some of the other men to watch Ferguson, and he rode around the group and dismounted beside Staves. Staves was unconscious, and there was dried blood on his clothing covering the upper part of his chest.

"My Gawd," a puncher exclaimed. "He was hurt back at the house, an' still he rode with us."

"That's the hell o' this reformin' business," Mournful snapped. "A man quits one bad habit, an' then he thinks he's gotta show the world he's a hero or some damn thing."

"Mournful, he fought——"

"I'll git that after while," Mournful interrupted.

He opened Staves's clothing and exposed his wound. It was high in the chest. There was not a great deal of the dried blood. Mournful did not know it, but Staves's coagulation time was very good. However, Mournful had considerable knowledge about wounds.

"That bullet didn't hit nothin' that'd kill him right off'n the reel," he said. "Seems to be up above his lungs. If the damn fool had stayed over at Partch's he'd have been in pretty good shape. Well, the wound has gotta be washed. Our first job is to get him back where he shoulda stayed. Git up, boy. I'll hand him to you."

The puncher mounted and received Staves's body. Mournful called to Ferguson: "Ride over to me. Then ride ahead o' me. One o' your hellions got a friend o' mine. That's another little bill you c'n pay."

Ferguson was silently obedient. Because of Staves, the ride towards the Partch ranch house was slow. Mournful had time to question a man who rode beside him.

"Hell, it wasn't no fight," the man said. "Them fellas rode right up to the house. We was packed in the rooms that faced that way. Gawd, it was hot. My fingers got so slippery I couldn't hardly hold my gun. I bet I lost ten pounds."

"That's the kinda stuff I'm int'rusted in," said Mournful. "Couldn't you tell me what sweat you lost in

gallons an' what poundage you lost in ounces? Then we c'n figger all the other men. Gosh, the total will be somep'n."

"Well, them fellas stopped so close to the house, we coulda almost reached out an' touched them. They shouldn't have been tol' to stick 'em up; but that there Staves at one o' the windas yelled the order to 'em. We went for their guns, an' we let 'em have it. We got all of them 'cept the ones you seen runnin' ahead of us. As the others dropped, them fellas wheeled away. I was near Staves as one o' them fired. There was just that one bullet from 'em. I seen Staves kinda hop back an' then stand still. I was gonna run up to him, but he said, calm enough: 'Is anybody hurt?'

"We shoulda knowed that was a stall, for that one bullet hadn't got nobody 'less it was Staves hisself. But I guess we all thought he couldn't have been hit.

"We lost a little time gettin' our horses, though we had 'em ready behind the house. Them horses was rested an' we let 'em out. You seen what else happened. Fact is, I reckon you killed nine—ten them fellas your own self."

"Ten or 'leven, I think," Mournful said. "I c'n allus git ten or 'leven outa eight."

He knew this puncher was worried, and he waited for him to go on.

"Staves done his share when we all fired. Then when he heard you yell he said we'd go over to you. Damn it, Mournful, I shoulda heard a funny sound in his voice, but I reckon I was too glad the thing was ended. Staves had kinda took charge, an' we rode over to you. 'Nother thing: when we went out to our horses, Staves was as spry as any o' us. He hopped his horse an' was well up to the top of everybody. He hadn't put his hand to his chest or nothin'."

"When a man sets out to prove hisself, he figgers on a long ride if he's any kind of a man deep down," said Mournful.

"Mournful, they's somethin' else," the puncher continued in a voice so low that he might have been confessing weakness on his own part. "They's that dance hall girl at the house. She——"

"There ain't no dance hall girl at the house," Mournful said sharply. "There ain't really been no dance hall girl there any time. If you're speakin' o' Cora Masters, she's jest a nice little girl that has been playin' in tough luck."

"'Scuse me, Mournful. Well, anyway, once when we was at the house I seen Staves talkin' to her, an' when he left her she followed him with her eyes long as he was in sight. If Staves dies she . . . well, I dunno . . . I ain't no hand to talk about such things."

"I'll tell you what you better do when you git to Partch's," Mournful said. "You better ride over to Winfield's an' git that girl. If somep'n lays between her an' Staves, she'll be the best medicine I know of for him."

"But Mournful, my good gosh, I'd have to tell her Staves was hurt. She might blow up right on my hands."

"Don't worry none about her blowin' up on nobody's hands. I know her f'm here to yonder. Hell, I rode f'm town with her. Don't you think I sized her up in all that time?"

"Oh, shore, Mournful. You c'n size up people."

"I'll git somebody else to ride over there," said Mournful. "You ain't got the nerve, I see."

"I have so!" the puncher said indignantly.

"Well, you couldn't find your nerve fer a minute. If you think you got it back, all right. When you git over there, jest ask for her. Don't let her git no second-hand news. That'd worry her, mebbe. Emily or Ina might put their arms around her an' soothe her up some an' then tell her everything would be all right. That kinda stuff is good enough in its place, but that won't be its place. You jest face Cora an' say: 'Ma'am, Staves has been hurt. Not much. No, ma'am. Not much. But Mournful Martin wants you to come over there. He thinks you could take better care of Staves than any o' us could.' When you're sayin' that, be cool, but not too cool. Be steady all the way through. Jest ac' like you was askin' the way to town or what is the price o' beef, or some such matter. You git that?"

"Shore! An' I'll do just what you say, Mournful."

"She'll watch you fer a minute an' then she'll ask somebody to git her a horse. You bring her over to Partch's.

"Don't babble to her," Mournful directed. "Let her do what talkin' is done. You c'n kinda nap in your saddle an' you c'n excuse yourself by sayin' you're tired."

"All right, Mournful."

When they eventually arrived at Partch's, Mournful went quickly to the puncher who bore Staves.

"The fella's awake," the puncher said. "He says he'll be all right."

"Howdy, Staves," said Mournful.

"'Lo, Mournful," Staves responded, but weakly. "If this fella will put me on my feet I'll go 'long to Winfield's. I got a little scratch, an' that, with this damn heat, kinda took me down. Let me to the ground, fella."

"An' if he does," Mournful said, "we'll put you under the ground, after a little bit."

"But, Mournful, I gotta——"

"You gotta have that wound washed out, an' it's gonna hurt you some," Mournful stated. "Here, boy, let him down to me."

Staves submitted to Mournful's carrying him into the house. Mournful put him on one of the two beds and then started a fire and filled a kettle, leaving a puncher to watch him. The puncher departed for Winfield's unobserved, and those remaining began to clean up the yard. Mournful had told them no bodies must be lying about.

While the fire burned up, making the kitchen like a furnace, Mournful hunted about for a bottle of liniment, the only antiseptic possible to be found.

He put the bottle on the table and, while he waited for the water to boil, he went to the door. For once sweat was running down his face. He saw Ferguson being guarded by three punchers. He stood watching the man. He apparently hadn't revived.

"Busted," Mournful told himself. "Busted complete."

He heard the water bubbling and he filled a pan with it, got towels and the bottle, and, so burdened, went in to where Staves lay.

"You know about wounds, Staves," Mournful said. "You know they gotta be kep' clean. I'll have to hurt you."

"I've threatened to hurt a lotta men in my time," Staves said. "I'll try to stand it."

"Oh, shore, you'll stand it. That there Masters girl will be on her way over here before long."

"Mournful, you mean that?"

"I wouldn't be joshin' you right now, would I?"

While he had spoken he had removed the cork from the liniment bottle. He walked up to Staves's side.

"Is she comin' of her own free will, Mournful?" Staves asked.

"No. I sent a puncher to git her. He'll prob'ly drag

her over here at the end of a rope. Now, grit your teeth. Take hold o' the blanket under you. Take a good tight hold. I'm gonna pour some o' this liniment inta your wound. It'll burn like hell."

Staves did as he was bidden. His mouth was tight, his eyes were closed as he awaited that pain.

Mournful put the neck of the bottle close to the wound and suddenly upended the bottle. The wound immediately filled and the dark liquid ran out over Staves's chest. Mournful knew that Staves was in agony. He raised his chest so that he rested on his heels and the back of his head in the end. His face turned gray. Mournful thought he was going to lapse into unconsciousness again.

But not even a moan escaped his lips.

He sank back and lay writhing. Mournful said in a whisper, his sustaining sense of humour gone for the moment, "You're stickin' it, ol' timer. It oughta ease off some in a few minutes."

"By Gawd, I'll ride it," Staves almost whimpered. "You can't get me down, Martin."

"Shore not," Mournful said. "An', man, listen to me: Anybody that c'n battle pain the way you're doin' don't need no whisky to keep him goin'."

"If you try to gimme a drink o' whisky, I'll kill you, Mournful," Staves declared.

"I jest give your wound a drink o' alcohol," said Mournful. "I reckon this here liniment could be drunk if a man had a brass stummick. It's about all alcohol, I've heard. You any easier, Staves?"

"I'm layin' on a bed o' roses, y' fool."

"Well, I won't say nothin' about thorns. You've heard that before. Now I'm gonna suffer some pain myself, wringing out hot towels. Hell, we'll have you dancin' a jig afore Cora gits here."

"Lemme wring out them towels," the puncher who had remained with Staves requested.

"An' that suits me down to the ground. My hands is preshus. You don't need yours special. If you git 'em burned off'n your wrists, we'll take up a collection for you."

"Martin, will you shut your mouth?" the suffering Staves asked. "My Gawd, you ain't half as funny as you think you are!"

"Shore I'll shut it," Mournful said. "But I am funny—to myself. An' lemme tell you that is a healthy state fer a man to be in."

The ghost of a smile came to Staves's lips, and Mournful saw that his pain had abated quite a little.

The puncher wrung out a towel, "phewing" considerably.

"The boy's in agony, Staves," Mournful said.

"Oh, leave the boy alone!" Staves snapped. "He's doin' all right. If you don't like the way him an' me ac's, you c'n get to hell outa here."

With which preparation, Mournful told the puncher to fold the towel and lay it over the wound. That hurt, too, but not as the liniment had hurt, and the puncher kept up the fomentations for half an hour, Mournful going out for hot water twice in the process.

"That's all," Mournful said at last.

"I thought you was gonna keep it up for a week," Staves said.

"I've had all the fun I want," Mournful retorted. "Now fer a bandage an' you c'n rest."

"Yeh, rest, with pains shootin' through me like hot knives."

"We hadda do it, ol'-timer," Mournful said, in sudden gentleness.

"Well, do you think I don't know that?" Staves asked. "You ain't got all the infermation there is in the world."

"You stay with him," Mournful told the puncher. "I got business outside."

"Mournful!" said Staves quickly.

"Yeh."

"Boy, leave me with this fella for about five minutes. I wanta talk to him."

The puncher went outside. Mournful sank into a chair and wiped his face. He said, again gently. "I wouldn't talk too much, Staves. I don't need to tell you rest is the thing now."

"Gimme a minute, Mournful. Mournful, you're a great fella."

"You're wastin' your breath tellin' me that."

"You can't fool me with your usual line o' talk. You're a man!"

"What'd you think I was?" Mournful yawned.

"Oh, all right. Keep it up. But tell me one thing. Have I got any chance with that girl?"

Mournful regarded Staves for a long time, his eyes half closed. Men who couldn't handle their liquor were bad business. Mournful had seen some men give up drinking

for a while and then go back to it harder than ever. So far as he could remember, those who had gone back were in greater number than those who had quit altogether.

"I'll tell you, Staves," Mournful said at last. "You got a chance with that girl. I've seen quite a lotta young girls fall in love, as it's called. I've seen some fall out. Women is funny. I don't know what they're lookin' for exactly. I guess husband's hasta figger that out, an' I ain't never been a husban'.

"This Masters girl will marry you. She——"

"You think so, Mournful?" Staves eagerly asked.

"Don't git excited. I think this Masters girl would marry any decent man. She's ain't never had nothin' but cruelty—far back as she c'n remember, I guess. A girl like that will fly inta any shelter she comes to. Mebbe she's in love with you. I dunno 'bout that. You shore are in love with her. Hell, the on'y question I c'n see is: Would you take care o' her?"

"Why, I'm well fixed, Mournful. I can give her anything——"

"That ain't the idea. Could you leave booze alone? Could you keep f'm lettin' her see you low in your mind? She's got fire in her—that girl. If you let her down . . . well, I don't b'l'eve she'd stand fer it. What she'd do I dunno. Kill herself, mebbe."

"Gawd, Mournful!" Staves cried.

"You c'n see you got a job on your hands," said Mournful. "I wouldn't do nothin' till I got on my feet. Men that's down f'm sickness or wounds goes soft in spite o' theirselves. Least so I've heard. Wait till you're the man you was when first I met you. Then you'll be able to see clear. Well, I gotta go outside. I'll send that boy in."

He left a silent man on the bed.

CHAPTER XXII

"... That Ends Well"

Mournful went outside and walked up to the punchers who were guarding Ferguson. It was broad day now and hotter. All the punchers, however, tired though they were, had refused to sleep till the Ferguson matter was settled. They gathered round, though not closing in because of the down-pouring sun.

"Well, Ferguson?" Mournful asked.

Ferguson, as the heat had increased had been permitted to sit in the shadow of the house. He raised a haggard face to Mournful.

"I s'pose I die?" he said.

"There ain't no other way. Here's Partch. What you got to say to him?"

"Nothin'."

"Your men swore him inta prison."

"A trick I'd used before," Ferguson admitted.

"You're a murderer."

"I've killed. My men have killed. What could an outfit like mine do?"

"Nothin' else. Well, I'm plumb tired, but I got a few minutes for you. I've heard you're fast. You wanta go up against me?"

"What'd be the use? I couldn't get you, the shape I'm in now."

"Nor in any other shape," Pete Partch declared. "Martin would drill you through any time."

"It might be. I dunno. I've been considered good. But why should I argue? I been thinkin' on'y of dyin'. I'd hate to be hanged."

"You got it comin' to you, ain't you?" Mournful asked.

"I'd like to be shot by half a dozen men," Ferguson said slowly. "I'd like to have them men picked out now."

"Whatcha want that for?" a puncher inquired.

"I wanta escape pain, if you'll gimme that much of a deal."

"A fella named Staves is layin' in the house," Mournful said coldly. "One o' your men shot him. I poured

liniment inta a wound. Then we put on hot towels for a long time. By Gawd, he knowed pain. You been right out here. You didn't hear him yell, did you ?"

"I didn't hear nothin'."

"I've never been able to figger out how it is you fellas c'n hurt other people but you can't stand it to be hurt your own selves."

"Oh, I've seen crooks stand pain," Ferguson said. "I dunno why I can't stand it."

"I s'pose you're turned sick whenever you see a square-shooter in pain ?" a puncher sneered.

"I don't mind the pain other people suffer."

"Mournful," said another puncher, "I don't get this fella. Is he playin' a game or somethin' ? Has he got somethin' up his sleeve ?"

"He's on'y busted," Mournful returned. "Well, there's no use chewin' on the thing. Do you fellas agree to let him be shot ?"

"A rope'd be best," the puncher declared. "It's what we gen'ally give thieves an' killers."

"Men, don't hang me," Ferguson pleaded; and he added grostesquely, "I couldn't stand it."

"Nobody could," the puncher said.

"Oh, let's give him a chance," said Mournful. "My gosh, I'm tired, an' the eyes o' all you fellas is like burnt holes in a blanket. We gotta get some sleep."

He drew out a card of matches and turned his back. He broke the end from one match and placed it and an unbroken match along the inner side of his thumb and held them there with his forefinger with the ends only slightly protruding. He closed his other fingers. Turning back to the men, he said, "The short match means hangin'. The long one means shootin'. Who'll draw ?"

A puncher and then Ferguson stepped forward. Mournful pushed Ferguson back. He still despised the man, and he guessed he was giving him this chance only because he himself was so tired. My gosh, he was half asleep on his feet.

"Won't you let me watch, Mournful ?" Ferguson asked.

"You'll git a square deal," Mournful said. "An' don't call me 'Mournful.'"

Ferguson remained where he was. The puncher drew a match.

It was the long one.

"You git shot, Ferguson," Mournful announced.

Ferguson sighed in relief. He said, "Pick six men, will you, Martin ?"

"No, I ain't pickin' no six men. I been bound to kill you fer a long time. I'll take the job myself. You won't suffer none."

"You an' me'll ride out a ways together ?" Ferguson asked.

"With all of us goin' along," a puncher said. "I don't like the looks of this."

"I can't turn no trick," said Ferguson angrily. "I don't want a bunch o' you stinkin' punchers see me die."

"Just for that Martin don't do the job," the puncher declared. "We do. We've drawed lots an' so we gotta shoot you. But we'll do it ourselves. Hell, we'll riddle you. I never seen such a crook as you are get such a break. To hell with you !"

Ferguson's face was gray and in that grayness his eyes were wholly red. He ground out, "You rotten cowards, Martin could kill me quick with one shot. You'll try to hurt me an' lemme suffer."

"Bring up his horse," the puncher said.

Ferguson's horse was brought up and horses for every man there except Mournful and Partch.

"I'm in on this," Partch said excitedly.

"Mebbe you oughta be," said the leading puncher "Get yourself a horse."

Mournful went over and squatted in the shade of the house. There was no use in opposing these punchers now. They would follow him whenever he wished to lead, but they would not stand his intervention now. Ferguson had gone too far with them.

"Ride on," the puncher told Ferguson, and Ferguson started his horse.

The men had not ridden more than fifty feet when they looked around at Mournful to see what he was doing. All they saw was a long man beside the house in the shade, his eyes on the ground.

Mournful was merely saying to himself that it didn't make no difference who pulled a trigger in the case of a man like Ferguson. He had gone up against Ferguson and his men and had fooled them. That was sufficient, so far as he was concerned.

He did not think of Ferguson and those men for long. His thoughts drifted to Staves and then to Johnny Partch,

over at Winfield's. Damn that Johnny. He would have to read the riot act to him.

The silence was deep now. Mournful couldn't hear a sound. And the heat! Man, ol' Arizona was doin' herself proud. 'Hottest damn June weather . . .

There was a sound of firing. Mournful guessed a dozen men had shot together. He rose. That was the last of Ferguson. He went into the house and told the puncher to split up the care of Staves among the men when they got back.

"How you feelin'?" he asked the wounded man.

"Fair. Oh, I'll get well, Mournful."

"You'll git well," Mournful agreed. "If you wasn't gonna git well, you'd be dead by now. The treatment we give you was enough to kill a horse. You want a drink o' whisky? Mebbe I could find some."

"Martin, get out!"

Mournful found food, ate some of it, went outside, and lay down in the shade of the house.

He was usually easily awakened, but he was aware that he was being shaken roughly when he came to himself this time. He rose and batted his eyes and yawned. The puncher whom he had sent for Cora was leaning over him.

"The lady's here," the puncher said.

Mournful got up sleepily and looked beyond the puncher. Cora was standing there. Mournful had expected she would be anxious, even excited, but she only looked at him and expressed no emotion that he could discover.

"Go inta the house an' git yourself somethin' to eat," Mournful told the puncher.

"I et over at Winfield's," the puncher said. "All I want is sleep."

"Go git it. It on'y makes you feel tougher'n ever."

The puncher departed and Cora walked up to Mournful. She said in a low voice, "You look terrible, Mournful. Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Nemmine about me, ma'am. Let's git to Staves."

"How is he, Mournful?"

"He's got a bad wound, but he'll git well. He don't complain o' no throbbin' an' he didn't have no fever las' time I seen him. Girl, he's all fussed up about you. Mebbe you know that."

"I don't think that's the way to say it, Mournful."

Mournful searched her pretty eyes. By gosh, there was

somethin' in them that he had not seen in them before. Somehow she seemed different in every way.

"How would you say it?" Mournful asked.

"Mournful, I love Staves."

"You better give me a minute or two before you go in to see him," Mournful said. "That fella has been nice to you, ain't he?"

"Why, he's the finest, gentlest man I ever met."

"Do you know that he's been a booze h'ister an' that when he gits a skinful he wants to use his gun?"

"He told me all about that. He said he'd never touch another drop as long as I lived."

"You b'l'eve him?"

"I do, Mournful. He told me he'd always been lookin' for somethin' but didn't know what it was. So he took to drinkin' now an' then. When he got what you call a skinful, he wanted to have some fun. He said he'd never killed a man, never had had to. You know he's all right when he don't drink, don't you?"

"Nice a fella as ever I met," Mournful conceded.

"Well, from now on he'll be as nice a fella as ever you met."

"Ma'am, you seem pretty sure."

The girl let her eyes drift away. She held them on the hot scene for quite a while. When she returned them to Mournful, they were wistful.

"Mournful, don't say anything that'll keep me from bein' sure. It's all I've got. It's all Staves has got. If he fails . . . Mournful Martin, he won't fail. He won't fail me. I may be takin' a chance, but I'm takin' it with my eyes wide open. I s'pose you never took a chance?"

Mournful had no retort to that. There was something in this girl which was a little beyond him. Shore he had taken chances. He had taken a chance with Ferguson and his men. And he had had nothing to back him up except his wits and his gun.

"You got me roped an' tied, ma'am," he said.

She had no education; she was not especially intelligent; but that strange thing was still in her eyes.

"I tol' Staves we must have faith in each other," she said simply.

"An' what did he say to that?" Mournful asked.

"He said, 'So help me Gawd, I'll never throw you down.'"

"I reckon you better go in an' see him," Mournful said.

" One thing more, Mournful Martin : We owe it all to you."

" My gosh, I didn't tell you to fall in love with the fella ! I been afraid fer you."

" You're not afraid now, Mournful ? "

Mournful did not know whether he was or not.

" Say it, Mournful. It'll help. Staves an' me will have to keep somethin' like that around us all the time."

" I ain't afraid fer you," Mournful said lamely. He stared at her and then he violently added : " By Gawd, I *ain't* afraid fer you.... Oh, come inta the house an' cheer this fella up."

They found the puncher seated on the floor outside the door. He said, " Staves is asleep. Don't wake him."

" I won't, doctor," said Mournful.

He and Cora went into the room. Mournful cried, " Hi, you ! Wake up an' tell the lady your sins."

Staves woke up. Mournful might as well not have been there. Staves had eyes only for the girl. She knelt beside the bed. Mournful left. Outside he ordered the puncher gruffly to go to bed.

" Them two don't need you nor anybody else," he said.

The puncher tottered outside, tottered into the bunk house. He'd sleep, Mournful told himself, an' there was nothin' greater than sleep, not even love.

" You damn ol' liar," he said.

He had a horse saddled when he saw the men approaching the house. He knew they would report nothing and as they stopped, he said, " I'm goin' over to Winfield's to see a fella. You Long men an' Staves men c'n go back to work—or to hell fer all o' me. What you Winfield men do is nothin' to me."

" You've had a sleep," one of the punchers said. " We're gonna get some. You can tell the world that."

" What kep' you so long ? " Mournful asked.

" Oh, we went over in the hills an' fooled around. Got some water for man an' beast."

" So long," said Mournful.

" So long, ol'-timer," the men called.

Mournful rode away. Presently he heard horses behind him. He looked back and saw Winfield and Partch. Damn if he hadn't forgotten them two. He guessed that was because Winfield was safe for Emily and Partch need no longer fear Ferguson and his men. He let the two overtake him.

"Well, Mournful," Partch then said, "I dunno how I can thank you——"

"I've heard that so often," Mournful began, broke off into, "Well, I've heard it two-three times. I ain't never yet met a man that knowed how to thank nobody. I gen'ally tell 'em not to try an' that's what I'm tellin' you."

"Me, too?" Winfield asked.

"I'm glad about you," Mournful said simply.

"I understand that," Winfield said.

And that was all of that. The three men maintained silence till they reached the Winfield ranch. Danforth and Long were sitting outside, but they asked nothing as Mournful came up to them.

"It's all over," said Mournful. "We hadda use our guns a little but nothin' to speak of."

The two old men only nodded. Winfield went into the house to see his wife. Partch started for the door and Mournful knew he was going to give the glad tidings to Johnny. Damn it, that boy didn't have no right to get no glad tidings. Mournful was sore at him.

"Hi, Partch," he called, "if you see Miss Harper in there, tell her Mournful Martin can't live long if he don't git a look at her pretty face."

"I'll tell her, Mournful."

He probably told her but she did not come out. Fifteen minutes passed.

"You give an order, Mournful," said Danforth and chuckled.

"Yeh, to a woman," said Long. "For once he's stopped."

"Think so," Mournful said. "Watch me!"

"You shore oughta wash your face before you talk to a lady," Long declared.

"I c'n talk plain through dirt an' whiskers," Mournful declared.

He went up to the door and knocked on it. Emily opened it. She cried, "Oh, Mournful, George says everything is settled. I'm so glad. We owe you so much."

"I'll send a collector around," Mournful said. "I'd like to go in an' see that fella Johnny Partch."

"Go right ahead, Mournful."

Mournful went into Johnny's bedroom. Partch was seated on one side of the bed and Ina Harper on the other side.

" Hallo, Mournful ! " Johnny cried ; and Ina greeted him more quietly.

" Partch, whatcha gonna do with that ranch you got ? " Mournful asked.

" Build it up. I got the money."

" You gonna make this fella Johnny work ? "

" Of course, he'll work."

" There ain't no ' of course ' about it. The fella's gotta be made to work. He's gotta be straightened out. He's the d-darndest fool ever I hooked up with. He ain't got no sense. He rushes in where he ain't wanted. He's got an idea he c'n run things. I hope I'm gittin' you tol', Johnny Partch."

Mournful glanced from Johnny to Ina and back again and back once more. There was a glow in Johnny's eyes.

" Lose your temper an' see if I care," Mournful said. " You know what I've said is true. You're goin' to marry one of the nicest girls in the land. You go ridin' off to town after that an' I'll rawhide you."

" It won't be necessary, Mournful," Ina declared.

" This boy has been actin' up since he's been here," Mournful said. " He's made me mad. I'm still mad. If he expects to git any help from the cowmen around here an' he's gonna need help, he'll have to mend his ways."

" You'll be the first to lend me a hand if I need it, Mournful," Johnny said.

" You're sayin' that because Miss Harper is here. Underneath you're so mad you could bite your tongue."

" Well——"

" Hush, Johnny," Ina ordered.

Ordered, said Mournful to himself, and looked at Johnny closely. The glow went out of Johnny's eyes. The look he gave Ina was not at all like the look which had been in Cora's eyes, but damn if it wasn't somep'n. By gosh, Ina was the boss here, a nice, gentle kind of a boss, but the boss nevertheless. Mournful decided he needed to say nothing more. He left the room.

" Mournful."

He turned. Ina was in the doorway. She came up to him and led him to the other door. She laid a gentle hand on his arm.

" Mournful," she said, " you know Cora Masters is going to marry Staves, don't you ? "

" Yes, ma'am."

" Staves used to drink. He might drink again. I've

told Cora I'll stand by her if trouble comes. I don't think it will. Staves is strong. How long are you and Mr. Danforth going to be here, Mournful ?"

"Oh, till nex' spring. Danforth ain't goin' back to no Oregon winter right away."

"Will you watch Staves—help him if he needs it ?"

"I shore will, ma'am."

Ina smiled and said, "You're fine, Mournful."

"No, ma'am. It's you. Here you are, in love yourself, with a wounded fella on your hands, but you c'n find time to think o' that girl. Ma'am, hones', I don't think there's any use in worryin'. The man don't live that'd throw that girl down."

"I don't think so, either."

"Then everything's all right, ain't it ? I come here to read the riot act to Johnny. He don't need nothin' like that f'm me. You'll handle him, ma'am."

"And you and I will handle Staves and Cora if that becomes necessary."

"I'm gamblin' now that we'll have plenty o' time on our hands if we don't find nothin' else to do," Mournful declared. "Ma'am, you're great. You make me think of Margaret Danforth, the wife o' ol' Danforth's son. She's the finest woman that ever lived."

"Why, Mournful," Ina said ; and then Mournful saw that you couldn't keep her confused for long. She said, "Mournful, if I'd been born a boy I'd growed up to be Mournful Martin."

"Aw, shucks, ma'am," Mournful said, opened the door, and edged through it. Before he closed it, he said, "Cora an' Staves can't lose, ma'am, with you an' me backin' 'em."

"Well, hardly," Ina agreed.

Mournful closed the door. He guessed he'd go out and tell the tale to Long and Danforth. But first . . .

"Winfield," he said, "come here a minute."

George hurried over to him.

"How about four fingers o' liquor," Mournful said. "Mebbe I'll need a second four fingers. I got so many people to drink to, I dunno where to begin."

"Mournful, sit down," Emily said.

She got a bottle of whisky herself and a glass and put them beside Mournful.

"Can you help yourself ?" she asked.

"I c'n try," Mournful declared.

He poured a good-size drink. He raised the glass.

"Here's to you, ma'am," he said, "Nicest girl ever I met."

"Mournful, if Cora or Ina were here instead of me, you'd say that to them," Emily asserted.

"Wouldn't I be sayin' the right thing, ma'am?"

Emily gave him a long look. By gosh, Mournful told himself, she and Ina were going to work together to guard and help Cora. Hell, that girl *couldn't* lose now. There was somep'n in the air an' it was gonna stay there.

"Exactly the right thing, Mournful," Emily said. "You'd better have another drink—to Cora and Ina."

"Ma'am," said Mournful quietly, "I'll jest do that."

He poured another drink and drank it slowly.

"Thank you, ma'am," he said and rose.

"Thank you, Mournful!"

Mournful heard her emphasize the "you." She was not thanking him for what he had done. She was thanking him for what he would do if the need arose.

He went outside. Danforth and Long looked at him.

"Come here an' get it over with, Mournful," Danforth said. "We must listen sooner or later."

Mournful did not tell them a word about what had happened. He told them about Cora Masters and Staves.

"We'll have a look in on Staves now an' then, Long," said Danforth. "I'll be ridin' again before many days."

"Yeh. O' course. I ain't workin' much. I got lots o' idle time."

Now, let's see, said Mournful to himself, who else could he line up? Hell, nobody! He had the best people in the country lined up now. Already Danforth and Long were discussing just how they could make Staves believe he was a great fella, so that his pride would be stronger than his weakness.

For all the attention they gave Mournful, he might not have been there.

Well, a long fella could allus roll a cigarette.

THE END

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